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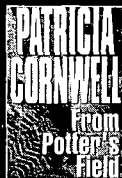
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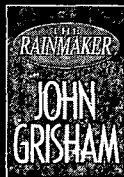
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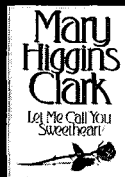
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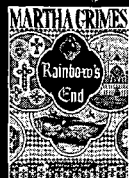
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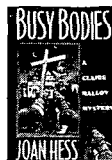
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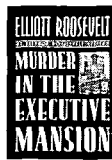
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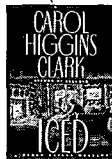
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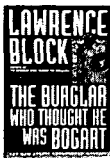
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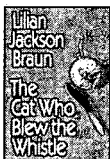
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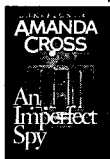
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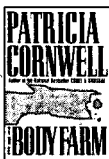
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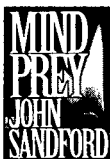
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CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

STICKS AND STONES AND THE CHOCOLATE SHOP	
by Stephen Wasyluk	12
THE CASE OF THE BIG BANG THEORY	
AND THE GRAND FINALE by James A. Noble	27
THE LAST OASIS by Sean McMartin	34
A POLICEMAN'S LOT by Jeff Hazard	46
BURIAL DETAIL by William J. Carroll, Jr.	66
OPENING DAY by Jack Sine	112
DELICATE BALANCE by Bob Tippee	121
WHERE DOES A GOLEM GO? by Bernice F. Weiss	136

MYSTERY CLASSIC

OR ALL THE SEAS WITH OYSTERS by Avram Davidson	142
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DEPARTMENTS

GUEST EDITORIAL by Ron Goulart	4
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH	65
UNSOLVED by Robert Kesling	107
SOLUTION TO THE OCTOBER "UNSOLVED"	120
BOOKED & PRINTED by Mary Cannon	152
MURDER BY DIRECTION by William Heller	155
THE STORY THAT WON	157

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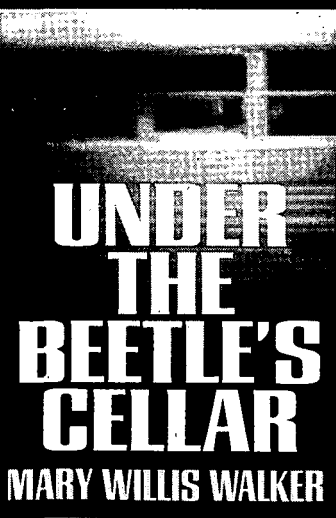
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GUEST EDITORIAL

by Ron Goulart

Funny Paper Detectives

American comic strips are celebrating their hundredth anniversary this year. In 1895 the Yellow Kid burst forth in the funnies, followed over the next few years by the likes of the Katzenjammer Kids, Happy Hooligan, and Little Nemo. Detectives started showing up in the nation's comic sections in the first decade of this century, at first as figures of fun, but by the 1920's, newspaper readers could find serious sleuths practicing their trade. The next two decades brought a flock of them, including Dick Tracy, Sherlock Holmes, Philo Vance, Charlie Chan, Kerry Drake, Rip Kirby, and the Saint.

In 1904 Gus Mager began drawing a newspaper strip about monkeys who dressed and behaved like humans and had names that indicated their

basic characteristics: Tightwaddo the Monk, Knocko the Monk, and Groucho the Monk. Gradually the monks morphed into humans, and in 1910 Mager started a new daily strip devoted to human characters and starring Sherlocko the Monk and Dr. Watso. Unlike other spoofs of Arthur Conan Doyle's hero, this one featured a detective who was a clever fellow and always solved his cases. There was a new case each day running under such titles as "The Mystery of the Purloined Pants" and "The Strange Episode of the Horse That Didn't Come Back." Sherlocko's recurring clientele included many of Mager's favorite monks, now in human form, among them Tightwaddo, Groucho, and Coldfeeto. It was Mager's manner of concocting

(continued on page 6)

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Susan A. Teitz**, Senior Assistant Editor; **Jean Traina**, Design Director; **Terri Czezczko**, Art Director; **Anthony Bari**, Junior Designer; **Cynthia Manson**, Vice President of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **Constance Scarborough**, Contracts Manager; **Barbara Parrott**, Director of Newsstand Circulation; **Bruce Schwartz**, Director of Circulation, Subscription Sales; **Dennis Jones**, Operations Manager, Subscription Sales; **Fred Sabloff**, Associate Publisher; **Judy Dorman**, Advertising Sales Manager. **Advertising Offices, New York:** (212) 782-8549. **Advertising Representative:** Dresner Direct, Inc., New York, New York, (212) 889-1078.

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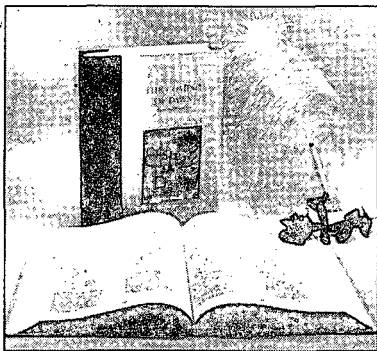
Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$24,000 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry, "we have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who, have never before won any type of writing competition."

How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in one original poem, any subject, any style to:

**The National Library of Poetry
11419 Cronridge Drive
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The Coming of Dawn, featured above, is one of NLP's recent deluxe hard-bound anthologies.

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "Each poem received will be acknowledged, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Anthologies published by the organization have included, *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

tag names that led to the first names of the Marx brothers, who were fans of his.

In 1913 Mager revived his burlesque Holmesian sleuth for the New York *World*. He now called him Hawkshaw the Detective and starred him in a Sunday page. The original Hawkshaw was the detective in the Victorian stage melodrama *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* by Tom Taylor, and Mager borrowed the name. Initially, Dr. Watso became the Colonel, and there was also a Moriarty sort of master criminal known simply as the Professor.

In 1921 Ed Wheelan began a daily strip called *Minute Movies* that burlesqued motion pictures. Wheelan introduced a stock company of actors and put them into every kind of story, including Westerns and aviation, sports, and detective tales. His leading lady, blonde Hazel Dearie, frequently appeared in continues devoted to *The Hazards of Hazel*, where she starred as Hazel Knutt, "the cleverest lady detective in all the East." Later in the 1920's Wheelan Pictures, Ink, star Will Power was now and then seen in stories about the crackerjack detective Inspector Keene. As the strip progressed, the movies got longer, growing from four or five days in length to two or three weeks, and became more serious in tone.

The earliest full-time serious detective strip was *Craig Kennedy*. Written by Arthur B. Reeve, it was based on the exploits of the Columbia professor, who used scientific tools and even psychoanalysis to solve crimes. Kennedy had appeared in slick magazines as early as 1910 and made his hardcover debut in 1912. He was also a character in several early movie serials, including *The Exploits of Elaine*. Unlike the serials, the comic strip was slow, stodgy, and extremely talky. Kennedy, who wore pince-nez glasses, was not a man of action and seemed to like nothing better than sitting around for days at a time discussing a case with whoever was handy. As in the magazine stories, which provided the continuities for the strip, the scientific detective made frequent use of the latest gadgets and inventions to solve cases. In "The Green Curse," for example, he used a sound detector and an otophone ("it hears light") to clear up the mystery of some museum thefts and a haunted mummy case. The strip was illustrated by Homer Fleming, a veteran magazine cartoonist, but it didn't last out the year.

The 1930's was a good decade for mystery fans. One could find detectives in just about every popular medium, from movies and radio to books and pulp

fiction magazines. One also encountered them in quantities in comic sections. The most auspicious detective strip of the period was *Dick Tracy*. It began in 1931, the same year Al Capone was tried for income tax evasion, and was the work of a thirty-year-old cartoonist named Chester Gould. Living in the Chicago area, Gould had sources of inspiration close at hand. "Chicago in 1931 was being shot up by gangsters," he once recalled, "and I decided to invent a comic strip character who would always get the best of the assorted hoodlums and mobsters."

Besides being tough and impatient, Dick Tracy was unimpeachably honest. An honest cop was much needed in places like Chicago and New York, to name but two big cities with less than spotless police departments. In addition to Gould's law-and-order approach, the strip's increasingly violent and bizarre methods of dispatching crooks and cops attracted readers. Undercover agents were frozen alive in refrigerator trucks, smuggled aliens were sunk in the ocean with their own chains as anchors, rival crooks were doused with cleaning fluid and set afire, midget thugs were roasted in steambaths. There were also shootings, floggings, bludgeonings, and an occa-

sional amputation. Gould was ingenious, too, at coming up with ways to almost kill his hero. Villains tried dynamite, decompression chambers, sulphur fumes, exploding furnaces. They even dipped Tracy in paraffin once.

The success of *Dick Tracy* didn't go unnoticed, and other newspaper syndicates began bringing forth imitations. These included *Dan Dunn* by Norman Marsh; *Secret Agent X-9*, with scripts credited to Dashiell Hammett and art by Alex Raymond; *Red Barry* by Will Gould; and *Radio Patrol*, written by Eddie Sullivan and drawn by Charlie Schmidt. Several sleuths from short stories and novels came into the funnies in the thirties as well. A *Sherlock Holmes* strip was drawn by Leo O'Mealia; after it ended, O'Mealia returned with *Fu Manchu*, based on Sax Rohmer's wildly melodramatic and unintentionally hilarious thrillers about the insidious Oriental menace. Philo Vance had made his first appearance in S. S. Van Dine's *The "Canary" Murder Case* in 1926. Other novels followed, and the character became immensely popular, turning up on the screen in 1929 with William Powell as the first Philo. In the early thirties there was, briefly, a daily Philo Vance comic strip drawn and probably written by

a young man who signed himself R. B. S. Davis. In 1938 a detective known for his patient gathering of clues as well as for his aphorisms came to the comics. The *Charlie Chan* comic strip by Alfred Andriola owed more to the popular motion pictures than it did to the six novels by Earl Derr Biggers that featured the Chinese detective.

Nineteen forty-six was the year of the private eye. That summer *The Big Sleep*, with Humphrey Bogart as Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, opened in movie palaces around the country. In the autumn *The Adventures of Sam Spade*, with Howard Duff as Hammett's hardboiled hero, began its radio run on CBS. Earlier in the year, two private eyes had made their debuts on the comic pages, one a tough, hardboiled type, the other more cerebral; both were former Marines. "The whole thing started late one afternoon. I was sitting in my office reading the papers about a killing. And then my door opened." That was how Vic Flint, handsome, blond, and with a fondness for herringbone suits and fedoras, began his first daily strip in January 1946. He was very much the traditional private operative of movies, pulps, and paperbacks: tough, wisecracking, and at odds with the cops. His cases took him to the haunts of the

rich and to flashy nightspots owned by the underworld. Ralph Lane was the artist, and NEA syndicate editor Ernest Lynn wrote the copy under the name of Michael O'Malley.

When Alex Raymond returned from the Marine Corps in 1946, he began *Rip Kirby*, a more intellectual private eye—he even wore glasses. A Marine hero who had served with distinction in the Pacific Theater, Kirby worked out of an expensive New York apartment and had a colorful English valet named Desmond. A stunning blonde model named Honey Dorian was his girlfriend.

Other postwar detective strips included *Hunter Keene* by Norman Marsh, a short-lived reworking of his *Dan Dunn*; *Thirty Paige*, about a police inspector; and *Judge Wright*. The latter, originally drawn by Bob Fujitani, was a hybrid, part detective story and part soap opera. It had a dark, shadowy look and was laden with slinky women in low-cut gowns, sleazy gigolos, brutal thugs, and an ample supply of interpersonal problems.

Leslie Charteris' *The Saint* came to the funnies in 1948. The comic strip adventures of the Robin Hood of Modern Crime were initially written by Charteris himself; the artist was Mike Roy. Charteris

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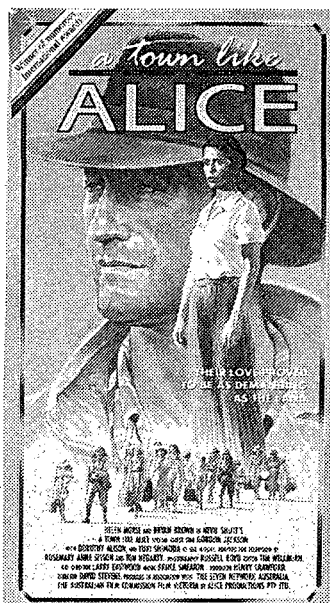


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brought in Hoppy Uniatz, the Saint's lowbrow tough-guy sidekick, from the novels and involved the pair in crimes and intrigues all around the globe. There were, of course, beautiful women and nasty villains. Some of Simon Templar's opponents were after money or jewels; others sought secret weapons that could destroy the world.

Another well-known detective appeared in the Sunday funnies in these years but only to sell hair tonic. The Sam Spade radio show was sponsored by Wildroot Cream-Oil, a hair preparation whose major ingredient was sheep fat. In the late forties, Wildroot advertised by way of a Sam Spade advertising strip that appeared about once a month in the Sunday comic sections. It was drawn by Lou Fine, an excellent artist who'd left comic books to become the most widely seen advertising strip artist of the period, and the cases usually had something to do with hair and hair oil. In one episode Sam, with the help of his secretary Effie, tracked down the culprit who was sabotaging the airplanes hired to skywrite *Wildroot Cream-Oil* high above the city.

The 1950's brought another wave of detective and mystery strips. Erle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason came to the comics in May 1950 in a rather

tame strip drawn by several artists in turn, the best of whom was the gifted Frank Thorne. Gardner apparently had nothing to do with the scripts, which were provided by his publisher and weren't based on the bestselling novels. The feature didn't replicate the punch and pace of the books, and there was little of the celebrated Mason courtroom pyrotechnics.

Jack Webb first played Sergeant Joe Friday on the radio. The downbeat, gritty *Dragnet* came to NBC television in December 1951, and the following year there was a newspaper strip. For a while typewritten copy in the captions was used to approximate Webb's voice-over narrative techniques: "It was seven twenty-three A.M., and we were working out of Bunco. . . ." Several cartoonists drew the strip, including Mel Keefer and Bill Ziegler; it was said that Webb changed artists because he had trouble finding one who could draw him as goodlooking as he thought he ought to be.

The world's bestselling fictional private eye hit the funny papers in the spring of 1953 in a strip called *From the Files of . . . Mike Hammer*. Ed Robbins was the artist, and Joe Gill, Robbins, and occasionally Mickey Spillane himself took

(continued on page 135)



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FICTION

Sticks and Stones and the Chocolate Shop

Stephen Wasylyk



Illustration by Cabell Hatfield

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Like one of those proverbial fire horses who couldn't be restrained after catching a whiff of smoke, I turned into the huge, undulating parking area of the strip shopping center less than five minutes after my scanner squawked.

The uniformed cop directing traffic away from the cluster of rotating rooflights on the cars in front of the candy shop waved me through, not about to challenge the front vanity plate of the Continental.

The plate read TOP MAN, bolted there when I was promoted to county detective chief by someone in my squad as a joke, since its egotistical message was as far from my personality as you could get. When I'd ignored its presence, the joke had fallen flat.

Always keep them guessing.

I parked, waited for an EMS ambulance to pass, and stepped up on the wide sidewalk under the protective canopy. A woman wearing a white smock sat in an open-doored cruiser, her feet on the ground. Auburn hair cut above the earlobes exposed dangling gold earrings. Features regular, lips full, chin determined. Only a slight tremor of the hand raising the cigarette to her lips betrayed the turmoil inside. The

patrolman keeping her company nodded. "Chief Dundee."

Driven by the air conditioning, the sweet smell of chocolate wafted through the open door of the shop into the soft evening. Inside, eye-high display cases on my left were interrupted about halfway along the row by a service counter. A man's body was half propped against the base, his legs spread, an automatic near his hand, paper money strewn over him like confetti. His knitted pale blue shirt was stained around a large pair of scissors protruding from his chest.

Mosler, who was young and black with tightly cropped hair, a broad, heavy face, and a well-cut suit, pushed his way through the little group of crime scene experts with an athlete's ease, taking in my jacket, chinos, and soft shoes while half smiling.

"A man's supposed to get away from these things when he's on vacation, chief."

"A personal interest, Mosler. I live about a mile away so you might call this my shopping center. When I heard the call, I thought I'd see what had happened. Bought many a box of candy here."

When I'd had someone to buy candy for.

He indicated the body. "He pulled a gun and told the two

women behind the counter to empty the register—”

“Two women? Every time I’ve been in here, there’s been only one. Short, thin woman about forty, nice smile—”

He nodded. “Enola Foster. Younger woman with her was just hired as a trainee. A part-timer named Page Oakes—”

“The women all right?”

“Physically, yes, but the meds took one look at Foster and hustled her out of here. Perkins went along to see if he could get a statement, but we doubt it. Deep shock. Oakes is outside. Pretty well shaken up herself, but gave us the story. After they put the money on the counter, things turned a little weird—”

“Explain weird.”

“Instead of taking off, he stood there calling them names—”

“Names?”

“Ugly old bags and worse. He said something about women not deserving to live. The way he was handling that gun, she thought he was building himself up to shoot. She closed her eyes. The gun went off. When she opened them, he was on the floor. Foster must have thrown the money in his face, scooped up the big shears they use when giftwrapping, lunged across the counter, and speared him in the heart. Probably dead

before he hit the floor. He got off one shot, which punched a hole in the wall.”

Shears? The Foster woman? Not only a nice smile but, knowing I was buying the candy for my wife, had a gentle way of kidding me that it was really for a young mistress tucked away somewhere. Very difficult to imagine her as violent. No wonder she’d gone into shock.

The dead man was well-built; craggy face women would call handsome, dark wavy hair fashionably long; knitted shirt, slacks and shoes of good quality. Even in death, he exuded a rough masculinity.

“Have a name?”

“No. No I.D. on him, but his prints are probably on record.”

“You may not have to wait that long. He couldn’t have walked here or come by bus. After the stores close, check the cars that are left. One has to be his.”

Mosler nodded. “Why do you suppose he—”

“Called them names?” I looked down at the man. Who the hell knew why people did what they did?

“I once attended a seminar where psychiatrists said some misfits hide behind the power of a weapon to spout racial and gender slurs and epithets they

otherwise wouldn't have the nerve to say."

"Uh-huh," he said. "Met a few like that. If he was one of those, he did it once too often. I don't think there's anything here the D.A. can milk for more than one or two bites on the newscasts."

"It would appear not. Just make sure you touch all the bases anyway. You don't want any questions you can't answer."

"Like what?"

"That's your problem. I'm on vacation."

The Continental purred on the way home. Everyone assumed I'd bought the car to celebrate my promotion. I hadn't. Cars had never been more than transportation, bought for as little as possible, but when I learned my wife was dying, I thought she'd had enough of riding around in rattling clunkers. She'd raked me up and down for what she called extravagance, but couldn't conceal her pleasure in driving something that wasn't one step from a junkyard. I kept it to remind me of all the things I might have done for her, but hadn't because I'd been too busy, stupid, or both.

The sweet smell of chocolate lingered in the car as if it had permeated my clothes during

the brief time I'd spent in the shop. Probably right about nothing being there for the D.A. Gunman threatens two women. Fearing death, one sees an opportunity and stabs him with a handy pair of shears. Soon forgotten by everyone. Except the woman. Cut and dried and proof that anyone can kill when the occasion demands, even a gentle woman with a nice smile.

Nothing deep there. Mosler's and Perkins' job to handle it. Young, but two of my best. Jokers, though; sometimes acted like high school cutups needling the teacher, like with that vanity plate. I didn't mind. Let them enjoy themselves. They'd wake one morning to find nothing to laugh about. A sense of humor was a sure casualty in this business.

I never laughed at all when signing the papers that crossed my desk.

Other senior officials at conventions moaned that they were no longer out on the street where the action was—an ancient delusion among aging warriors that they were still capable of combat. Not me. The street belonged to the young, who still had the muscle for the physical confrontations and the stamina for the long hours.

I served far better by making sure they did the right things

at the right time in the right way. A bit pedantic at times, I'll admit, but that wasn't the only reason the Comedy Twins called me The Professor behind my back. Those heavy, black-rimmed glasses I liked, a thin face, and wardrobe of gray suits would make me look at home striding across any campus.

Back at my desk a week later, I concluded I wasn't very good at the taking-a-vacation business. Probably because the few I'd taken had been planned and engineered by my wife. Most of the week had been frittered away wondering what to do, to find that once I decided, it was too late—an indecisiveness that permeated all my free time. My life had become a bit like driving down roads I'd never paid any attention to because someone had always been there to give me directions. Now I had to find my own way.

Much better off in the familiarity of my office; reading the reports, analyzing the often inventive grammar; satisfied when the work was done well, irritated when it was done badly, and angry when it hadn't been done at all.

If my two jokers had cut a corner or two on the candy shop incident, I couldn't see where.

A car abandoned in the lot had been stolen, so it came down to fingerprints after all. Roy Kevis. Arrest record in a neighboring county but no convictions. The automatic was a cheap, short-barreled .25 caliber easily concealed in a man's hand or pocket but deadly enough across a counter.

Foster's prints had been on the scissors, and the last time Mosler checked, she hadn't gotten over the shock as yet. Killing another human being was difficult for anyone to live with. For some, recovery—or acceptance—required a great deal of time. For a few, it could be impossible. Foster might be one of those. She simply sat and stared. Wouldn't talk about it. Wouldn't talk about anything. Due to be transferred to the psychiatric wing, but since she couldn't commit herself and we had found no family, the doctor awaited a court order.

Impossible to get a statement from her.

Which left the other woman, Page Oakes.

She wouldn't have been there at all if Chevalier, the man who owned the store—he had three—hadn't hired her that afternoon and wanted her to start immediately; working with Foster because she'd been with him the longest and was the best he had. He'd introduced

her and left. She had been in the shop for only an hour when Kevis walked in with his gun.

Oakes had never been held up before, but she'd always thought the idea was to grab the money and run. Yet Kevis stood there calling them stupid bimboes and worse. She remembered thinking of the children's chant, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." But that gun could. When she heard him say women were too stupid to live, it dawned on her that he intended to shoot them both.

The next thing she knew, the gun went off and he was down, the scissors projecting from his chest.

All clear enough. The facts fitted the situation, but I kept seeing Enola Foster behind that counter wrapping the box of chocolates I'd selected, speaking generalities in her husky voice because we didn't know each other, really. To me, she was a pleasant, accommodating woman always willing to help and I was just the tall, thin man in a gray suit who stopped in from time to time to buy candy for his wife.

Something about that scene disturbed me, sitting above my stomach like the breakfast sausage I shouldn't have had.

A holdup and a death, and everything — *everything* — that had gone on had been reported by one witness. No corroboration at all. No apparent reason for the Oakes woman to lie, but I'd always been leery of one-witness crimes. Perhaps because a now-retiring detective had once cautioned, "Sometimes people tell you what sounds good because they figure the truth is none of your business."

No one else had even heard the gun go off, and it was Oakes who had called 911.

I flipped to the transcript of the call.

My name is Oakes. There's been a holdup—

Hold on, ma'am. (Pause to scan the information on her computer screen.) You're calling from Chevalier's Sweet Shop in the Merton Valley Mall?

That's right. The man is dead, I think—

The holdup man?

Yes.

Anyone else injured?

No. Please hurry.

No ahs, ers, or ums. Transcripts were not only word for word, but pauses and hesitations were always included. Nothing unusual there. Or was there?

I went to listen to the tape.

Three sentences. Oakes had a nice voice. Very clear and pre-

cise. Not only no hesitation but no emotion. No trace of hysteria or anxiety at all. She could have been calling to see if her dry cleaning was ready. Very unusual for someone who had thought she'd be shot and had just seen a man stabbed to death. But if everyone lost their heads in emergencies, there would be no heroes or heroines.

I thanked the man who'd run the tape for me and walked back to my office, considering my options. One, I could sign the papers and send them through. Two, I could tell Mosler and Perkins I wasn't satisfied, and listen to them mumble The Professor was losing it. Three, I could follow it up myself, but then I'd hear grumbling about trust and confidence.

By the time I reached my office, I'd decided on a fourth. It didn't hurt for an old man to get out from behind his desk occasionally and stave off atrophy into uselessness, but I'd take Mosler along to assuage the duo's egos. And to prop me up if needed. If my uneasiness was justified, there might be a lesson here for us all.

Enola Foster was now out of bounds. She'd been transferred, and no psychiatrist would

let us get within ten feet of her.

But if she wasn't available, her past history was.

Her apartment complex consisted of three yellow brick, five story buildings in an arc. The staff of the tenant office could tell us nothing, but since we had badges and all, they'd be very happy to provide us with the names of people in the apartments adjacent to hers. Was she coming back, did we know? They did have a waiting list—

No answer at any of the doors until we tapped at one across the hall a few apartments down.

The woman was about five two and just a shade on the plump side, not enough to prevent her from looking good in fashionable slacks and blouse and expensive shoes, her face round and full and expertly made up, her wavy, grayish coiffeur precise. Couldn't do anything about age creeping up on her, but damned if she'd give it more of an edge than it had earned.

Simpson, her name according to the list. Adele. Widow.

The list gave no clue as to the good humor in the eyes and the warmth in the voice when she invited us in, or of the genuine compassion when she talked about Foster.

"I wondered, but the hospital would give me no information and said she couldn't have visitors. I'm so sorry—I couldn't believe what I heard. Enola, of all people, to stab a man? Such a gentle soul, really."

Had she known her well?

"We weren't bosom friends, but we did talk now and then. My effort more than hers. You may not have noticed yet, but I'm no introvert. I was happy for her when—you know she actually blushed when I told her I thought her friend was handsome."

Which friend was that?

"Her live-in boyfriend. Lucky woman." Her eyes laughed at me. "I could use one of those myself. Always nice to have a man around. Especially a good, solid looking one. Wouldn't want to volunteer, would you?"

I smiled. "Thanks for the compliment, but I'm sure you're not short of applicants. This live-in boyfriend. You met him?"

"Only saw him. In the elevator and hall, you know. She seemed to be a little embarrassed when I mentioned it, as if anyone would care. Goodness, these days no one would care if you entertained the entire U.S. Navy as long as you held the noise down, but that's what I mean when I say she's a gentle soul."

Mosler threw me a puzzled glance. "No one I talked to mentioned a live-in boyfriend. Are you sure? If she had one, I'd think he'd have shown up at the hospital—"

"The relationship wasn't held up for public scrutiny. I happened to see him leave her apartment a few times. Perhaps no one else did, so he was just someone they saw in the hall. I have an idea it came to an end. I ran into her in the lobby about three days—" She frowned. "I think that's right—three days before the—you know. I asked how she was doing, but she turned away. I could swear she had tears in her eyes, but before I could say anything more, she was gone. I thought about knocking on her door, but—" Her shoulders lifted. "She's a private person, and I'm really not the prying neighbor type. A mistake, I'm sure. Sometimes another woman to talk to—"

Mosler carefully wrote down her detailed description. Very observant, Mrs. Simpson. I was sure that six months from now she could still describe *me* right down to the color of my socks and throw in a good guess as to the brand of my underwear.

I wondered aloud if any of the absent neighbors might have something more to contribute.

"I never noticed her being friendly with any," she said. "You can ask, of course. Your problem is to find them in. We have two types in this building. The young ones, married or not, who work all day, and the ones over sixty-five—" She smiled. "And then a few like me. Too old for one group and too young for the other."

"I noticed," I said.

The smile broadened.

"Charming man. Sure you don't want to volunteer? I promise you won't have to repair leaky faucets and things like that."

Mosler's grin said he couldn't wait to tell Perkins.

In the car, he said, "Looks as though you turned up that question I can't answer. The lady had Kevis down to the scar on his chin, but as Foster's live-in boyfriend, how does he end up dead in her shop instead of her bed, the way it usually happens? Some clever way of getting out from under?"

"I doubt it. If she'd planned it, she wouldn't be in shock, and Oakes, whom she'd never before seen in her life, would have to be her accomplice. Was Kevis's picture in the paper?"

"No. By the time we put a name on him, the papers had a new crime of the day."

"Then get one and see if Mrs. Simpson can back up that description with a positive I.D. And while you're out, stop by Chevalier's office and get a copy of Page Oakes's resume."

In the interest of forestalling staring at the bedroom ceiling in the early hours of the morning, I called my counterpart in the county where Kevis operated, asking questions no one had reason to ask before. One thing about questions. Some can bring about precisely what you're trying to avoid.

Mosler returned. "Bingo. She wondered where the picture came from. I didn't tell her that he was the man in the shop."

"You didn't have to. She's sharp enough to have put it together by the time you hit the elevator. Get Oakes's resume?"

I scanned the sheet Mosler handed me.

"Any idea where we can find her?"

"No problem. She was willing to go back to work, but only during daylight hours, so Chevalier shuffled some of his people around and gave her nine to noon."

Hand encased in a transparent, disposable plastic glove as she selected chocolates at a customer's direction, she glanced

at Mosler, hesitating so slightly I would have missed it if I'd blinked.

I'd have gone on full alert long ago if I'd had more than a glimpse of her that night. No one could ever have called *her* an old bag, even a nutcase like Kevis.

Tall; five eight or nine. Naturally wavy hair. Face too square to be called pretty but attractive enough to generate a half-dozen invitations to the prom in high school and would bring a half-dozen to a Senior Citizens Ball someday.

Moved with assurance, and if there was anything about her that would scare men away, it was sensing that she was more in control than they were. Easy to understand that voice on the tape now.

I strolled past the display cases, just as I had when trying to recall which centers had been my wife's favorites, an amused Enola Foster watching. I'd invariably been wrong, if it was possible to *be* wrong when selecting handmade chocolates for a choco-freak.

Customer gone, she said to Mosler, "I hope you're not here with bad news about Enola."

Arms folded, Mosler propped himself against the wall.

"No. No change there. This is Chief of Detectives Dundee. He wanted to talk to you."

I came back to the counter—slightly higher than normal to make wrapping easier; perhaps two and a half feet deep; silver paper on a roll to the left, large shears on the right, register and scale on a shelf behind her; light glinting from rows of selections already boxed and attractively wrapped and displayed above.

Eyes large, startling blue, steady. Chief of Detectives? Hah. I could sense a wariness, a readiness for battle.

How to get through those defenses?

I leaned forward, my elbows on the counter. "Ms. Oakes, let me tell you a story. Once upon a time—"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw an astonished Mosler come erect, silently mouthing, "*Once . . . upon . . . a . . . TIME*—?"

"—in a county to the north, there lived a handsome con man who liked to amuse himself romancing women who had jobs that called for handling cash—lonely, middle-aged women who thought that love had passed them by and couldn't believe their good luck when he came along. Such women would be willing to do anything he asked if it meant keeping him. Are you intrigued by this dynamite opening?"

"I think I've heard it before."

"Everyone has. The plot has been used in countless books, movies, operas, and dramas—which, after all, mirror real life. The lover—man or woman—demands the other prove his or her devotion. Or else. *His* test was to walk in, be handed the money, and walk out, leaving the woman to give the police a prepared story of a holdup. No risk to him at all. By the time the woman realized that was the last she'd ever see of him, it would be too late. If she told the truth, she might be charged as an accomplice. Offer to testify and it would be her word against his. Worse, everyone would know how big a fool she'd been. So his victims swallowed their pride and lived with it. More difficult for some than others, I'm sure."

She had no expression at all.

"The police knew, of course, but couldn't get one to bring charges and have the others back her up. There is no comfort in being one fool among many. The women also believed he'd use the gun he carried. When he arrived for his last bogus holdup, there was someone else in the shop. Her presence might have made the woman think she'd been saved from doing something that went against every honest bone in her body. Perhaps next time she'd find the courage to say no.

Like everyone blinded by love, she had no idea of the real character of the man."

A woman entered, glanced from Mosler to me, sensed we weren't there to pick up a box of chocolates, and hesitated as if to walk out again.

I smiled at her and stepped back. "Please. I recommend the butter creams."

The woman thought the butter creams were delicious, but what she really had stopped in for was the chocolate covered cherries, which her husband positively loved, and which she bought for him every so often even though there was no special occasion, you know?

I knew. Hers was a marriage that would last. After she left, I leaned on the counter again.

"Another man would have simply changed his plans, but this one operated on high-octane hate. He took the situation as a personal affront and blamed the woman, humiliating her with foul and obscene language. He'd always counted on the woman he'd victimized not having the nerve to identify him, but the other woman certainly would."

She could have been carved from stone. I was beginning to wonder if I'd taken the wrong approach.

"She was very bright, this other woman. Working on her

master's, which was why she took only part-time positions. Bright enough to recognize that the man got more perverse pleasure out of demonstrating his ability to dominate and humiliate women than he did from the few dollars."

Finally. A muscle in her jaw jumped as though she'd clenched her teeth.

"And bright enough to realize that when the man ended up dead on the floor, revealing the relationship between the two would publicize the poor woman's secret. So she made up a believable story. The precise description of how he died wasn't as important as protecting the woman from further humiliation. She didn't need her mistake publicized for others to giggle over while reading the morning paper."

The muscle was still jumping.

"Yet there might have been another reason for the story she told the police. Not that they care, mind you. The man had that gun. He had a history of threatening women. They would just as soon call his death justifiable homicide and forget it."

I straightened. "But a false story is always subject to misinterpretation and can result in the wrong conclusions, and no one could want that. If you

were telling my story, Ms. Oakes, how would you end it to reassure them and put any speculation to rest?"

She walked away and folded her arms, looking out through the plate glass window at traffic passing on the highway beyond the parking lot for a few moments before returning.

"He demanded to know what the other woman was doing there. When she told him, he said, you should have called me, you stupid bitch. She started to shrink. It was awful. He stopped at nothing, even his opinion of her performance in bed. She cringed at every word, as if he was whipping her—"

The defiant chin thrust toward me. "He completely destroyed her. She was aware of nothing, not even that the man was dead. To hurt her even more—"

She leaned on the counter exactly the way I had, as if measuring the distance between us, then her eyes settled on mine, chin defiant.

Mosler seemed ready to leap to my assistance.

There was no sound except the hum of the air conditioner.

She broke into the silence. "I don't see how there can be any misinterpretation at all." She might as well have added, "*And I don't give a damn what you think.*"

I smiled. "Thank you for telling me what I wanted to know. The last paragraph of the story, of course, concerns a Dr. Chang, the psychiatrist treating the poor woman—"

Her eyes didn't drop, but the chin was no longer defiant and the voice so soft I hardly heard her.

"An appointment has already been made."

"I had hoped it was," I said.

That was the only smile I ever saw, shaky though it was.

In the car Mosler cleared his throat. "*Let me tell you a story? Once upon time?* And leaning on the counter like a trucker hitting on a waitress in a diner? Was that a new interrogation technique I haven't heard about?"

"I'll explain in the office."

"I don't drive with my ears."

"Ah, but you can't take notes and there may be a quiz at the end of the week."

He lowered himself into a chair suspiciously. "This is going to be one of your lectures, isn't it?"

I'd always allowed a little free-speech leeway, with the understanding it had to be earned and could be quickly lost by mediocre performance.

"In your report, you mentioned the money scattered

about. You drew the conclusion that Enola Foster, already infuriated by his insults, now thought Keviss was about to kill them both. She threw the money in his face, scooped up the shears and stabbed him. Horrified by what she'd done, she went into deep shock. Perfectly good reasoning and a justified conclusion. It took a little time for me to realize what bothered me about it. Nothing to do with learning that Keviss was her boyfriend, by the way. I simply remembered watching as she wrapped candy I had bought."

Mosler fidgeted, as though he was thinking, *get to the point*.

"Foster couldn't have killed him," I said. "She was too short to reach across that counter with enough leverage to use the shears, especially since he would have flinched away from the thrown bills. Page Oakes is more than tall enough. When I leaned on that counter, I was giving her a little body language that said I'd realized only she could have done it. Message received. You saw her do the same to me."

"Thought for a minute she was going to attack you for doubting her word or something."

"Just a little wordless communication. The let-me-tell-you-a-story approach was to

give her an opening to say she did it without worrying about any repercussions. She wouldn't go that far. What she did was to indicate that Kev's insults had already driven Foster over the edge—she was aware of nothing, she said. Foster wasn't only too short, she was psychologically incapable."

Mosler wasn't going down without protest. "Her prints weren't on the scissors."

"She had to be wearing one of those plastic gloves, which also kept the blood off her hand."

"I had forensic check the trash baskets."

"But no one looked into the pockets of her smock. Foster's hand had no blood on it when they examined her. I asked. Almost impossible to stab someone without a few drops spurting back."

Mosler was getting angry at himself and taking it out on Oakes. "Why didn't she say so in the beginning? Sure, you can get into a hassle when you kill someone, but she had nothing to worry about. Okay, I understand her wanting to protect Foster from being known as Kev's bed buddy, but you know we'd have kept that quiet if she asked us to, considering what he'd already done to the poor woman."

"She didn't want us asking questions she didn't want to

answer. Now take a deep breath. Hold it. Let it out slowly. One of Kev's previous victims was named Oakes."

His face went blank. He looked at the ceiling. "Please. Not her."

"No. Her sister. While you're seeking help from on high, ask how it came to be that she was there when Kev walked in. Because that's a question none of us can answer, not even her. She didn't even want to try. I don't blame her."

He left, mumbling something to himself that sounded like, "*—gonna be staring at a wall like Enola Foster.*"

I smiled. All supervisors will deny it, but every damned one secretly relishes those moments that justify holding the position. I felt smug enough to let that plate sit on the Continental for a few more weeks.

Sticks and stones, I thought. Sticks and stones may break my bones but names can never hurt me. Except they could. And did. They had struck Enola Foster like hammer blows, destroying an already shaky pride and self-esteem and causing her to shrink inside where no one could ever hurt her again.

I suppose that if the story was told, there are a great many names people would find for Page Oakes. People are

good at calling each other names.

I doubted it would bother her. Surrounded by the sweet smell of chocolate there in that candy shop, a shattered woman beside her, only she had looked into the muzzle of that gun.

And Kevis's eyes.

I like to think that the only reason she killed him was what she saw there, but I don't know. And don't want to.

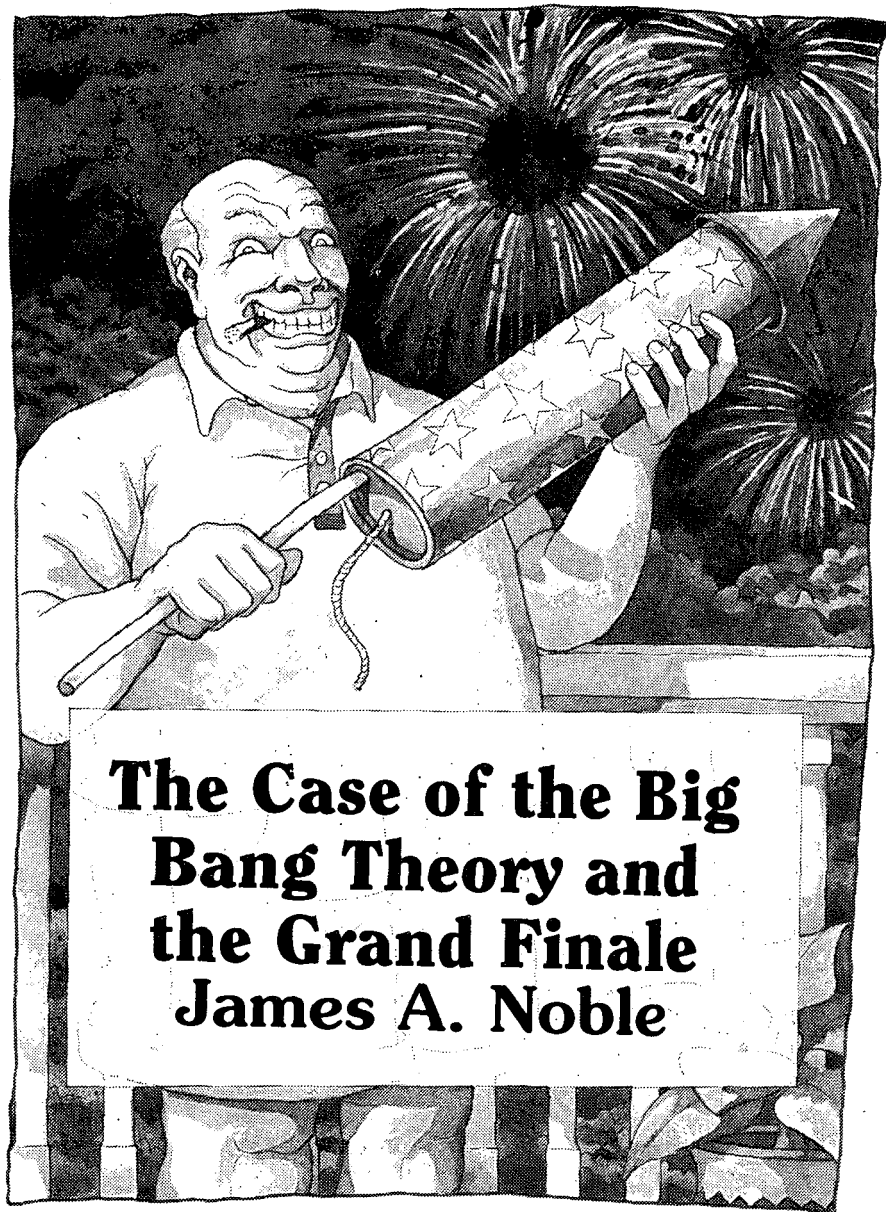
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I still shop at the center. It's convenient, and the bakeshop produces a dark rye so good I happily line up to part with my money. I no longer visit the candy shop.

Adele Simpson positively will not touch chocolates. Loves them, but can't handle the calories, she says. Can't be tempted at all.

Some women have a will of iron.

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**The Case of the Big
Bang Theory and
the Grand Finale
James A. Noble**

The frown on Captain John Evert's face reflected his displeasure with having to discuss the case at all.

"I hope you nail this killer soon, Mark," he said quietly. "I don't think I'll ever forget that murder scene."

Detective Sergeant Mark Murphy nodded in agreement. "It was pretty bad, all right. If it's any consolation, it appears Harriet Chiltern will fully recover."

"That was Bryan Chiltern's wife, right? As far as I'm concerned, she's a prime suspect in this case. Did you get a load of the size of that life insurance policy she just took out on her husband?"

"Hey, come on," retorted Mark. "There's at least a dozen people with a reason for wanting to bump off Chiltern."

Evert tilted his head to one side. "Did you say bump off? There was barely enough of the bodies left to identify. I'd say that was a little more than a bump."

"You're forgetting. She was seriously injured," Mark said.

Evert just waved his hand. "She just didn't realize the explosive force of that bomb."

"It wasn't a bomb," said Mark.

Evert raised an eyebrow. "You must be joking. What in heaven's name could cause *that* much damage and kill three people?"

Mark got up to retrieve the box he had set on the chair by the side wall when he had come in. He placed the box on Evert's desk and removed some pictures, shuffled through them, and chose one to hand to the captain.

Evert slipped his glasses on and stared at the photo. It showed a smiling bald man standing on a wooden deck holding a large red Fourth of July rocket covered with white stars. The picture was obviously taken at night with a flash camera. Nothing in the background was visible in the darkness.

"That's Bryan Chiltern. There were a lot of cameras at this Independence Day party," said Mark. "A few were damaged, but there are plenty of photos taken just before the explosion that were unharmed. There's even a videotape that survived."

Evert whistled. "Look at the size of that thing. You're not saying fireworks caused that explosion, are you?"

"That's not a holiday rocket," replied Mark. "It's a stick of dynamite made up to look like a standard fireworks rocket. It would take more than a malfunctioning Fourth of July rocket to cause that big bang. The lab already confirms it was a dynamite explosion from the residue at the scene."

"It sure *looks* like a Fourth of July rocket."

"That's what the murderer intended. Let's look at it more carefully on the videotape."

Evert looked up at Mark, the frown lines on his forehead more pronounced than ever.

"The tape only shows the people and incidents prior to the explosion," Mark assured him.

Evert said nothing. He gestured toward his VCR sitting on the far shelf under his television. Mark selected one of the videotapes from the box. He rose and stuck it in the VCR and rewound it briefly. Then he turned on the set.

"Ready?" asked Mark, noting that Evert was still staring at the photo.

"Get on with it," Evert said reluctantly.

The television screen flickered for a moment, and the scene of a party of five or six people talking, drinking, and mugging for the camcorder could be seen. Mark lowered the volume to a whisper.

"Who's operating the camera?" asked the captain.

"Harriet Chiltén," replied Mark. "Apparently she tapes all the holiday festivities during the year. I think it's something her husband forced her to do. He liked posing for the camera for some reason."

"Besides Harriet, who else survived who might have had a motive for killing Bryan Chiltén?"

Mark pointed to some of the people as they passed in front of the lens.

"Well, there's Richard Cameron, one of the survivors. Over here is Franko Wister, another one who came out unscathed. They both worked for Chiltén. The point is, Bryan Chiltén was a very hated man in the business world, as were most of the people who worked for him.

"Chiltén would have his cronies infiltrate successful small businesses, destroy their credibility, take them over, and sell off the assets to a front man before sending them into bankruptcy."

"What a sweetheart," commented Evert.

"There's at least a dozen people who wouldn't think of attending one of his parties after he took over and destroyed their businesses, but they'd have no qualms about killing him and his flunkies for what they did to them."

The scene switched to Bryan Chiltén lighting firecrackers and cherry bombs with his cigar and tossing them out into the darkness

of the back yard. The guests were giving him plenty of room but were still within camera range. Chiltén would puff on the cigar and laugh loudly when each firework exploded.

"Idiot," said Evert with disdain.

"This sort of thing went on every Fourth of July around his house. Apparently everyone knew how he celebrated. Now watch. Here it comes," said Mark, increasing the volume on the television.

The scene switched to Chiltén holding medium-sized Fourth of July rockets one at a time by their tailsticks and lighting the fuses. The camcorder had limited success in following the rockets up into the sky where they burst brightly in the air.

"And now for the grand finale," said Bryan on the tape as he brought the big rocket into view.

A woman's voice could be heard off camera. "Here, Franko. Take the camera. I'm going inside. That thing scares me."

"Harriet?" Evert asked.

Mark nodded. The camera jiggled briefly and then returned to Bryan showing off the rocket to the camcorder lens.

"Still think she's not involved?" Evert said. Mark made no comment.

"We have to thank Melvin for this little beauty," said the recorded voice of Bryan.

"Melvin?" asked Evert.

"Melvin Conrad," said Mark. "Killed by the explosion."

"Okay, folks," came Bryan's last comment as he held the rocket up by its tailstick and lit the fuse with the cigar. "Stand back."

Bryan Chiltén looked up at the camera with a somewhat concerned expression on his face when he saw the intensity of the lit fuse. Mark punched the stop button on the VCR, and the television broke into noisy static. He hit the off button.

"You know what happens next."

"I don't understand," said Evert. "Was Melvin Conrad suicidal?"

Mark shook his head as he removed the videotape and put it back in the box. "Nope. I don't think he knew that rocket was a disguised dynamite stick any more than Chiltén did. I think the killer either gave it to Melvin anonymously or offered it to him openly figuring they would both be killed in the blast.

"Melvin was the owner of a successful furniture business that was being set up to fall victim to Chiltén's scam. Melvin didn't know that, of course. He still trusted Bryan and thought he was going to help him expand his furniture business. Melvin knew

Bryan liked showing off by discharging fireworks on Independence Day. The murderer must have counted on Melvin's giving the rocket to Chilten and taking all the credit for the gift himself so his name would not be mentioned."

"So who do you think gave it to Melvin?"

Mark grinned for the first time since he came into the office. "I don't think, I *know*."

"You know who killed Chilten and the others?"

"Yep."

"How did you figure it out with so many suspects?"

Mark picked up the photo Evert had been looking at before and handed it to the captain. "Look at the photo carefully and remember what I told you, and you'll know the answer to that question."

Evert held a palm out. "What the heck. It's just a picture of Bryan Chilten standing on the deck of his home holding the phony Fourth of July rocket. Come on, give me another clue."

Mark leaned forward on the desk and tapped his finger on the photo. "Bryan told me who the killer was."

"What?"

"Bryan told me the name of his killer, and it's not Melvin."

Evert shook his head. "I'm buying *again*, ain't I?"

"Bring the photo along," said Mark. "You'll need it."

"Kelly's, I suppose."

Mark just rose, took the box under his arm, and walked to the door. "Meet you downstairs. I've got to return this stuff to the evidence locker."

As Mark and the captain walked out of the station, Evert couldn't help pestering his detective for more clues.

"Okay," sighed Mark, giving in. "When's the last time anyone gave you a present for the Fourth of July?"

"Never, that I can remember," said a confused Evert. "Is that supposed to be another clue?"

Mark just continued walking.

"Hey, look!" yelled Kelly to the crowd as he spotted the captain entering the bar. "Mark's beer dispenser has arrived."

The off-duty officers grinned at the captain. Evert just turned his head rapidly toward the door. "Kelly! Did you see that?"

Kelly leaned over the counter and looked at the door. "No, what? What?"

"Your liquor license just disappeared out the door." The crowd roared.

"Ah, come on, captain," said Kelly, sheepishly. "Just a little joke. Huh?"

"Actually, I'm buying the rounds this time," said Mark, pulling out his wallet and laying the money on the counter.

"You're kidding. He finally figured one out?" asked Kelly, gesturing toward Evert with his thumb.

Mark just chuckled. "How about bringing them over to our table?" he requested as he walked away from the bar.

"Thanks," said Evert as they sat down. "I appreciate the thought, but . . ."

"Hey," interrupted the detective. "You *are* going to figure this one out. Still got the photo?"

Evert pulled the picture from his pocket.

"Okay, look at it and tell me how the killer made the stick of dynamite look like a Fourth of July rocket."

"Well, let's see. . . . Obviously, he taped a stick or thin dowel to the same end where he stuck the fuse in. Looks like he made a little nose cone out of cardboard or something, then he glued some kind of paper over the nose and the body of it."

"Some kind of paper?"

"Yeah, you know. Decorative paper. Fourth of July stuff. See," he said, turning the photo toward Mark and pointing at the rocket. "It's bright red with white stars all over it."

Mark put his elbow on the table and his chin in his hand. He stared silently at the captain.

"Well, the killer *had* to cover it with something," continued Evert. "The dynamite stick probably had 'TNT' printed on it, 'Explosives,' all sorts of stuff."

Mark remained silent. Evert turned his gaze to the photo again. Finally he looked up and smiled.

"Fourth of July giftwrap?" he said suddenly, realizing the answer. "Highly unlikely."

"So what kind of paper is that?" prompted Mark.

"Bright red with white stars . . . probably Christmas giftwrap," said Evert.

"Something that isn't that easy to find in June or July," added Mark. "So it's probably left over from Christmas. And what does Harriet Chilton have to do on every holiday because her husband forces her to?"

"Videotape him," said Evert, now laughing. "And last Christmas, she must have videotaped Bryan opening his presents. And when

he got to the one wrapped in the bright red paper with the white stars that perfectly matched the wrapping on this explosive device in the picture, he read the card, looked into the camera, and said something like this one is from. . . .”

“Wanda Franklin,” finished Mark, smiling as the beers arrived at the table. “Past owner of Franklin Excavation and the only one to be put out of business by Chiltan between December twenty-fifth of last year and this July fourth.”

Kelly continued to stand by the table with the tray under his arm after he had delivered the beers.

“You *really* figure this one out, cap’n?” he asked in disbelief.

“Wait a sec,” replied Evert as he picked up a beer and downed two big gulps. Then he put the glass down on the table, smacked his lips, and said, “Yes, I did.”

THE CASE OF THE MISSING COPY

Chagrin has wracked AHMM’s offices lately; if you read (tried to read) the Editor’s Notes in the October issue, you know why. “Continued on page 72” it said, but because of a printer’s error, it wasn’t. Here, then, is what should have been there, with our apologies to Ms. Zelencik:

Coincidentally, Linda M. Zelencik, our other new author in this issue, is a graphic designer. “A Blue Moon in June” is her first short story, but she has won numerous prestigious awards for essays on literary and artistic subjects in competitions sponsored by Purdue University, where she takes writing classes. She attended the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, has written articles for the Chicago *Sun-Times* and *Today’s Chicago Woman*, and, in addition to all this, works in Chicago on CNA Insurance Company’s in-house publications. Like almost everyone else, she lives south of the Arctic Circle.

FICTION

THE LAST OASIS

Sean McMartin

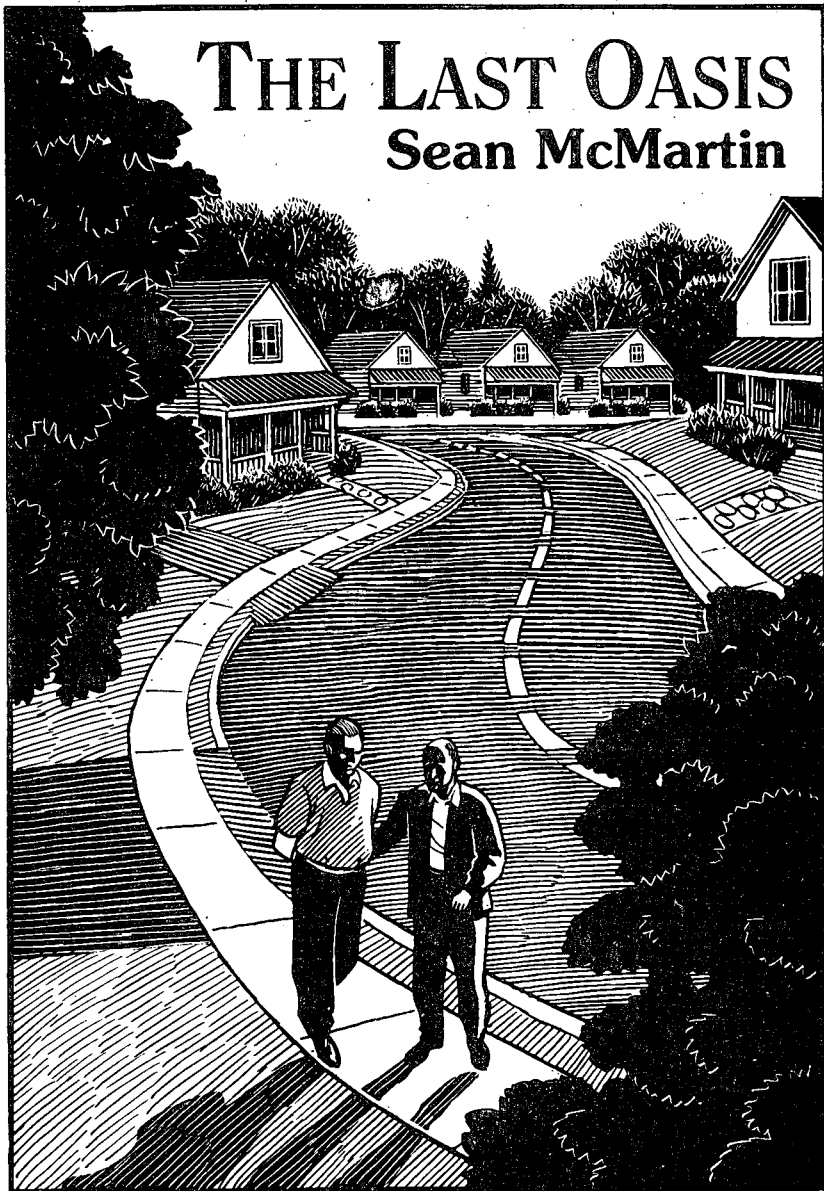


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

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The weather lent the proper sights and sounds to the funeral. The sky was battleship grey; a huge cloud to the west was loaded with rain; in the middle distance the thunder sounded like the rataplan of muffled drums for a fallen hero.

David Mulholland, the deceased, had been a retired bank manager dead at the age of seventy, unheroically and on his back from liver cancer. Jim Meigher had known him only to the extent of waving on his morning stroll at a thin figure getting the sun in a wheelchair, his wasted body wrapped in a field jacket too large for it.

It appeared that the entire population of Elysian Acres, some two hundred ninety-three people, was there. Standing shoulder to shoulder among the graves and on the winding road, faces devoid of expression, they could have been taken for a crowd awaiting the opening of a new shopping center. Had Mulholland been that well-known, that well-liked? When Jim's own Mary Margaret had been buried six months ago, only the neighbors closest to their house had shown up at the funeral home and St. Monica's Church. None had been at the cemetery.

The priest finally finished his leaden recital of the prayer's for David Mulholland, and the exodus toward home began. Elysian Acres was a senior citizens community. The houses were limited to three architectural styles and three color schemes for roofs and siding. The planting areas in front and on both sides of the houses were limited to mums, impatiens, yews, holly bushes, and a dogwood or Japanese maple tree. The Grounds Committee kept close watch to prevent the planting of overly exotic and possibly malevolent plants and trees like Venus flytraps and monkey puzzle trees.

Jim's only real friend in the development, Willie Weiner, the community phrasemaker and financial advisor without portfolio, described Elysian Acres as the "last oasis before the endless desert." The average age in the development was seventy-one. Jim, retired from his position as a high school principal, was sixty-six. Only his sideburns were grey, and as yet there were no wattles or liver spots.

Ruth Mulholland, the widow, did nothing to overplay the mien of grief. David Mulholland had been ill for over a year, and the strain on her must have been great. His own Mary Margaret had died suddenly of a major and totally unexpected heart attack. She had never been a burden, and she had not even been able to hear him say, "Goodbye, my darling. Thank you for loving me."

They had driven to the cemetery in Willie's Mercedes. He had once provided an apologia for his ownership of such a car.

"A Jew with a Nazi staff car, you say in revulsion? I answer that it is my way of getting even. Every time the damned thing needs repairs I say, 'See, you Nazi bastards, how really inferior your products are. You are second-class people, fit only to gas and burn your betters.'"

Willie was sixty-nine, too fat by about thirty pounds and one who regarded exercise as the cause of premature death. He went to Friday night services at Temple Beth El despite the fact that he had admitted to Jim that he was an atheist. He never bothered to explain the anomaly.

"I don't know why humans exist, Jim," he once said, "and I cannot for the life of me envision a Hereafter. *Bubkes* we go to."

Jim said for his side of the age-old controversy, "I once read something the author described as a pastiche on Descartes's 'I think, therefore I am.' 'I am, therefore the world is. If, when I die, I am no more, the world never was.'"

"Well, *hinky, dinky, parley voo*," Willie said. "What the hell does that mean?"

"I think the author is saying that there must be either a Hereafter or Nothingness. So describe Nothingness for me."

"That's like asking me to tell you what musical key I snore in. What is *your* Hereafter like? *You* describe it."

"I can't," Jim said. "I do know that the concept of a God has existed almost since man started to walk on two feet. If that concept is to be discredited, it has to be done by something more powerful. What is more powerful, Willie? Logic?" He shook his head. "Not big enough and too often wrong. Also, it contains no rewards, no punishments. It's cold, sterile, full of arithmetic symbols that occupy the minds of nonbelievers."

Willie wagged his head from side to side in answer. He dropped Jim off at his house.

"Y'know, ol' buddy, not to change the subject, but Ruth Mulholland is a widow now," he said. "She is also financially sound. Dave invested wisely, on my advice naturally. She isn't bad looking, as older women go. She is around your age, and two eligible people should not erect 'Keep Off the Grass' signs around themselves."

"So?"

"So pay court to her, as they said in the good old days before the Great Fire of London. Hit on her, man, dance the dance of love."

"No, thanks. My Mary Margaret gave me all the marriage I'll ever want."

"Mary Margaret exists only in your memory. She will go right on existing that way. I felt the same way when my Deborah died, but I got over it. For awhile I had a helluva relationship with a town gal named Della McCan until her traveling salesman husband got wise. He's still trying to find out who put the horns on him."

Jim grinned. "Didn't the liaison shock your neighbors?"

"Why do you think I go to temple on Shabbes? Nat Shapiro, one of the trustees, stood on my unmowed front lawn and recited the Kaddish when the news of my dalliance leaked out. To the Jews of Elysian Acres I was officially dead."

"What about the other trustees? Didn't they have something to say?"

"The Board is carefully represented," Willie said. "A Catholic, Charley Arndt; a Protestant, specifically a Methodist, Martin Andrews; and a Jew, Nat Shapiro of beloved memory. They speak by denomination."

"Why don't you make a hit on Ruth Mulholland yourself? You're eligible."

Willie shook his head. "A Jew and a Catholic? Wouldn't be seemly. People in this little conclave of ours are quite religious. You go to church?"

"Occasionally," Jim said. "St. Monica's."

"The people around here would like it better if you went every Saturday night or Sunday morning. Also, if I know anything about your faith, on holy days of obligation your lukewarm religious practice has been mentioned, my man."

"You're kidding," Jim said. "Homeowners directing religious activity? That violates my rights under the First Amendment to the Constitution."

"They respect a different right. The right of uniformity. I know a couple of neighbors who are closet atheists, but like me, they go to services. It's smarter to conform, Jim. How long has your wife been dead?"

"Six months next Wednesday."

Willie shook his head. "Time you started thinking about remarriage. That's why I mentioned Ruth Mulholland."

"Oh, get lost, Willie," Jim said wearily.

Willie held a finger out.

"The people of Elysian Acres are purists. As for you and Ruth as a couple, it has been bruited about through the ever-loving grapevine. Ruth is also a Catholic, so there won't be any wrestling with the Vatican on that score. Nature, as interpreted by the homeowners, abhors single blessedness."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this, Willie. What happens if I refuse—which I certainly will; does someone read the Kaddish on my front lawn?"

"No, Kaddish is reserved for the Chosen. I don't know what happens to Catholics. Maybe an extra millennium in that place without toilets you people call Purgatory."

"Whatever they do in retaliation has to be against the law."

"What law? You signed a paper when you bought here promising to live up to the Rules and Regulations of Elysian Acres."

"Those rules dealt with things like no decorations or statues in planting areas, storm doors to be the same color as the entry doors, no fancy storm windows, things like that."

"You overlooked the vital clause," Willie said, "'and such other actions and practices regarded by the Elected Board of Trustees and the homeowners of Elysian Acres as not being in the interests, well-being, and harmony of the Elysian Acres residents.'"

"Christ," Jim said. "That gives them one helluva lot of power. Has anyone ever challenged it?"

"Not successfully. If you care to have a go at it, you have my moral support. Just don't mention my name. I will make a small entreaty to the false god, Logic."

Jim did not see Ruth Mulholland for nearly two weeks, much of which time he spent driving around New England, where he and Mary Margaret had frequently vacationed.

He got back in time for the July Fourth celebration in the Elysian Acres clubhouse. For the first time since Mary Margaret's death he decided to attend one if only to hear some joyous sounds, however raucous.

Six tables, each seating ten people, took up half the meeting room. The other half held a dance floor the size of the average dining room and a podium on which reigned the Fiddlers Three, a musical group consisting of a synthesizer, a trumpet, and a set of drums, not a fiddle in sight. They made up for lack of talent with the vigor of their playing.

By the rules, he should have sent a check to the Social Committee two weeks ago. Perhaps Tess Ciampi, the chairlady of the Social

Committee, would accept the five dollars in cash and waive the formality.

The tables, except for the one nearest the rear entrance to the room, were filled. He noticed Ruth Mulholland seated at one of the occupied tables. He saw Tess Ciampi make a slight gesture, and two of the people at Ruth Mulholland's table got up to dance.

Tess said to him, smiling widely, "Glad you could come."

"Do you accept cash?" he asked.

"In your case we'll make an exception."

She held the chair next to the one at which Ruth was seated.

"We even reserved a seat for you."

Jim smiled his thanks and exchanged nods with the others. He didn't know a single one, including Ruth Mulholland.

"Have you been away?" she asked.

"Yes. I toured what people refer to as God's country."

"I think God's country is wherever you grew up," she said. "Mine was New York City."

"Also mine," he said. "Specifically, the Bronx—Riverdale section."

"Brooklyn," she said with a smile.

"You don't have the accent of Dem Bums."

"Bryn Mawr knocked it out of me," she said.

She was not pretty, but her face was interesting, intelligent. The blue eyes were direct, the rather wide mouth resolute. He bet no one dared address her as Ruthie. The manipulation of seating arrangements annoyed him, but it did have an element of drollery.

The meal was cold cuts, rolls, and salads. Everyone was expected at these affairs to bring his or her own liquid, alcoholic or otherwise. He had forgotten. There was a bottle of chablis in front of Ruth. He hated white wine, but if she offered it, he was bound by the code of gentlemen to accept. She did and he did. It had the faintly laxative taste that distinguished white wine.

"You prefer red wine," she said.

"How can you tell?"

"Your mouth," she said. "It curled up in distaste."

He smiled and shrugged. "I prefer a good bordeaux or a beaujolais."

"I'll remember that," she said.

What for? Was she advertising her availability? How much was available? He ate sparingly. The whole affair was a joke. He recalled the gesture of Tess Ciampi to the couple who had vacated

the seats next to Ruth Mulholland. They hadn't seemed in the least confused or offended, nor had they returned to the table.

The band moderated its cacophony to the extent of playing a fox trot.

"That's 'You Are My Special Angel,'" Ruth said, "one of my very favorites."

He felt like pointing out that one did not modify a noun with an adverb of degree. No. He was being a gentleman.

"Care to dance?" he asked.

"Love to."

Did he imagine it, or were all eyes on the two of them? Charles Arndt, the president of the Board of Trustees, nodded to him. He said something, and the others at his table glanced at Ruth and him. Based on their looks they were pleased with the dancing duo.

"How tall are you?" Ruth asked.

"Six feet," he said, "in my bare feet."

"You look shorter sitting down. You must have long legs. I'm five ten. Also in my bare feet."

What else could they compare in the interests of compatibility? He could not restrain his annoyance.

"I spent three years in the army during World War II," he said. "Wounded at Bastogne. Bronze Star, Purple Heart. Got out a captain. I am neither a Democrat nor a Republican, a liberal nor a conservative, a pedophile nor a homosexual. I dislike poetry, except for that of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Robert Frost. I prefer the music of Lerner and Loewe to that of Rodgers and Hammerstein. I am difficult to get along with. I adored my late wife. Unfortunately, we had no children. If I had an ounce of good sense, I would join a Trappist monastery. Anything else you would care to know about me?"

She said nothing for a moment; then in a tone free of emotion she replied, "I think you are one damned fool if you think you can thwart the wishes of the trustees and the homeowners of Elysian Acres. Our community is Ultima Thule with a Strauss waltz the community theme."

"The wishes of the Homeowners Association *et al.* be damned. I can always vacate this place."

"You can try," she said. "Nice knowing you."

He walked her back to the table, bowed, and left.

Charles Arndt stopped by at midmorning a few days later to—as he put it—"pass the time of day." A large man with white, wavy

hair and a square face, he resembled a great white hunter closing in on a rhinoceros.

"Everything going well?" he asked pleasantly.

"The best of all possible worlds," Jim said.

"Ah well, glad to hear it," Arndt said. "We think of Elysian Acres as the ideal place to spend one's golden years."

"I have never accepted the description of prostate and bladder troubles, arteriosclerosis, and cancer as the golden years," Jim said shortly. "Brass-plated would be more accurate."

Charles Arndt shook his great head up and down several times, whether in agreement or because he was preparing a retort in defense of the gold standard Jim wasn't sure.

"One of the reasons this community flourishes is that it consists of married couples," Arndt said. "In the opinion of the homeowners, it isn't suited to singles, and they take a dim view of casual relationships between members of the opposite sex."

"Yes, I know. Willie Weiner told me about his Kaddish."

Arndt nodded in satisfaction. "Your lady has been dead for just about six months," he said. "People are concerned. Loneliness is a bitter pill."

"No fooling? If you can find a way to bring back my Mary Margaret," Jim said, "I won't have to swallow one."

"Ruth Mulholland is a very fine woman," Arndt said. "She is, like you and me, a Roman Catholic."

"I'll go along with the charade," Jim said. "What the hell makes you think she'll accept my suit if I decide to press it?"

"She will."

It was not a prediction. It rang like the terms of a papal bull. Arndt bowed slightly and went out the door. Willie Weiner dropped in shortly after Arndt had gone.

"What did the Feldmarschall want besides the washing of his feet?"

"He wanted my hand in marriage."

Willie chuckled. "You'll make a great match."

"He wanted me to give it to Ruth Mulholland, who, he says, is a fine woman, solitary, available. All in all, it is a matter of duty if not of honor."

Willie walked across the room like a penitent, head down, hands clasped behind his back.

"You might give it some serious thought, Jim."

"I'll be damned. You should talk, oh great swordsman."

"You will be pleased to know," Willie said, "that the ex-swordsman is getting married in two weeks to the sister of Cantor Seth Applebaum of Temple Beth El. Her name is Sarah. She is fairly *zaftig*, beyond childbearing age, and in due course we might even get around to holding hands."

"You, of all people," Jim said. "How come?"

"To coin a phrase, you can't fight City Hall. The pressure of the homeowners and their surrogates, the trustees, shouldn't be taken lightly. We are living, my friend, amid *gemütlich* despotism. Something like the early years of Hitler before he went wild."

"Let's get the hell out of this honor farm. Get apartments somewhere."

Willie shook his head. "I'm not wealthy, and neither are you. No outsiders in our age group are buying even though the original value has declined. I can't afford to sell at a loss. I've got Sarah. You go after Ruth Mulholland."

"Like hell. I don't like my mind being made up for me. As for the homeowners and the trustees, screw 'em all, the long and the short and the tall."

The next morning while taking his early morning walk he overtook Ruth Mulholland. Her stride was somewhere between that of a male hairdresser and a female golfer. She was dressed in a navy blue sweatsuit and full makeup. None of the other females he occasionally met on his morning walks wore anything on their faces but smiles of greeting.

"I've never seen you on the morning walk," he said, "or for that matter on my evening stroll."

"This is my first time out," she said, looking at him without blinking an eye. "I thought you might feel the need for company."

They passed Baldwin Lane and Pomeroy Court. At the end of the street just before the clubhouse he stopped and faced her head on.

"Ruth, I am not a gregarious person. I like people, probably because I understand them and have no illusions, but I prefer them at a comfortable distance."

"In other words, I should offer myself to the community at large," she said.

Her eyes were bulging, and there were red blotches like the paint spots on a circus clown's face.

"Sorry," he said, "but you have been dangled before me by people who would be better off devoting themselves to their own business."

"Elysian Acres is a family," she said in a fusillade of ice pellets. "We are each other's business."

"I thought only Orientals practiced the custom of choosing a bride or bridegroom for their children," he said. "But we are not children, Ruth. Look, I am still in love with my dead wife. I hold her memory in my arms every night. Neither you nor anybody else can take her place."

He took off before either could say another bitter word. At just past ten that evening, while he was watching a Mets game on TV, two detectives from the Jefferson police department came to the door.

"Mr. Meigher," the older of the two said, displaying the shield and identification of one Sergeant Justin Browne, "there has been an attempted rape on the person of Mrs. Ruth Mulholland of Windover Place." He hesitated, looked uncomfortable. "You have been tentatively identified by a Mrs. Hilda Carmody as having been in the vicinity at that time. Would you please accompany us, sir?"

Jim couldn't find the words to protest. He moved with them like a sleepwalker. In the police station, Ruth Mulholland sat on a bench alongside the door. Next to her sat a whitehaired woman he recognized from his daily walks. Hers was the last house before the clubhouse.

"A bit drastic, isn't it, Ruth?" Jim said.

Her face was devoid of expression.

"Is this the man who attacked you, Mrs. Mulholland?" Sergeant Browne asked her.

She shrugged. "I really can't say. I was knocked down from behind and the pants of my sweatsuit pulled down. I must have fainted. Mrs. Carmody apparently scared him off."

"Were you sexually assaulted, ma'am?"

She shook her head. "No."

Mrs. Carmody raised her hand. "Sergeant, I might have made a mistake. He looks a little like the man I saw knock Mrs. Mulholland down, but he is much taller and heavier. No, he isn't the one."

The sergeant shrugged. "Case of mistaken identity, Mr. Meigher. Sorry for the inconvenience."

As he walked by, Jim said, "Better luck next time—Tootsie."

Ruth Mulholland's face remained deadpan. Hilda Carmody winked at him. They took off in Mrs. Carmody's car. The police drove Jim home.

The *News and Views*, a four page paper issued biweekly by the Homeowners Association, carried a short paragraph:

"Mrs. Hilda Carmody, 34 South Amboy Road, accused James Meigher, 17 Wellington Drive, of the attempted rape of Mrs. Ruth Mulholland, 10 Windover Place, on South Amboy Road this past Tuesday evening. Mr. Meigher was released by the police for lack of evidence."

He phoned Belinda Kellington, editor of the paper.

"Mrs. Kellington? Jim Meigher. Regarding your item, I was not released for lack of evidence. The whole damned thing was a case of mistaken identity. I am not a rapist."

"Thank you for your call, Mr. Meigher," the cheerful voice said. "It is always pleasant to hear from a homeowner."

He listened in fury to the dial tone.

His lawn went uncut by the landscaping firm assigned to the job. Just like Willie's. Jim hired a young man with his own mower to cut it. Nobody interfered.

The next afternoon there lay in the tubular receptacle for Elysian Acres flyers a bill for one hundred dollars from the Elysian Acres Homeowners Association. The text read simply, "For employment of unauthorized landscaping personnel."

Jim ignored it. He was visited on Friday evening right after he returned from dinner at the Rustic Mill Diner by all three members of the Elysian Acres Board of Trustees. Having all three seemed to Jim to be overkill. With the utmost courtesy and an amused smile, he invited them to be seated on the sofa. In that comfortable area they could most properly sit like the High Tribunal prepared to determine the fate of Martin Luther.

Arndt came right to the point.

"James Meigher, you are guilty of antisocial behavior, refusal to obey the laws of the Elysian Acres community and—um—a cavalier attitude toward a female member of this community."

"I plead total indifference to Elysian Acres and its uptight inhabitants," Jim said. "I don't know if that bruises the feelings of this kangaroo court, but it's the only thing I can come up with under the circumstances."

No one said a word. Finally the three rose as one and marched in lockstep out the front door.

"Have a nice day," Jim said cheerfully.

He drove up to Plainfield early the next evening to visit friends. Only Willie Weiner knew his destination. He didn't get back until

midnight. Before he garaged the car, he spotted something on his front door. Midcenter, rather high, was a black plastic wreath. Just below it, perfectly centered at eye level, was a sheet bearing the letterhead of the Homeowners Association. The message read, "James Meigher, it is with great regret that the Board of Trustees is forced to declare you anathema. From this day forward and so long as you shall remain a homeowner in Elysian Acres, no one will speak to you, comfort you, or come to your aid in any situation that may threaten your life or limb."

It was signed by all three trustees.

"The least you could have done," Jim wrote on the sheet, which he ripped off the door, "was to sign this in blood. I may or may not forgive your ignorance of proper protocol."

He nicked his finger with the small blade of his penknife and pressed a bloody fingerprint below the trustees' signatures. He signed it, walked head high to the home of Charles Arndt, fastened it to the front door, and then took the wreath and flung it like a Frisbee into the starry sky.

All of a sudden the lights in all the houses for two blocks went out. The first stone hit him on the leg as he turned into Windover Place. No one visible. Another whizzed by his head. Still no culprit in sight. A hail of pebbles indigenous to the poor soil in this area hit him in the back. When a stone the size of a bar of soap hit his head, he fell to his knees, staggered up, and ran. A trickle of blood coursed down his cheek. For the first time he couldn't sneer at their Graustarkian manners, but he would not—damn it!—give them the satisfaction of surrender.

He tripped and fell heavily. Another stone hit him squarely in the left temple.

Stunned, he looked up trillions of miles into the neutral heavens.

"Mary Margaret," he whispered so no one could hear, "help me."

FICTION

A POLICEMAN'S LOT

Jeff Hazard



Illustration by Jason Eckhardt

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At teatime many years ago—when Britain still had an empire, when Britannia still ruled the waves, and when Bertie Wooster was doing his best to wheedle a couple of hundred quid out of his Aunt Agatha—a telephone rang.

At teatime, mind you!

I dare say it was the only telephone in the British Isles with the temerity to ring at that sacred hour, yet ring it did, not in Bertie's London flat, but in Sergeant Heath's Nettlefield Police Station.

At his teatime Sergeant Heath did not want an emergency to take place, yet the jangling telephone was apparently trying to tell him that an emergency was doing precisely that.

Finally, driven more by desperation than by devotion to duty, the sergeant answered the telephone.

"Nettlefield Pleece Station, Sergeant 'Eath 'ere. . . . Oh, it's you, Miss Valerie, isn't it? And wot, may I arsk, is so all-fired himportant that ya 'as to be disturbin' a chap at 'is teatime? . . . 'Er ladyship's fainted? Not again, surely? . . . All of an 'eap on the floor, and y'ave no more smellin' salts? Dear me! . . . Lost 'er brooch—not *the* brooch? . . . Well, that's quite another matter. . . . I'll send Constable Gompers up directly. Cheerio!"

Turning to the young constable, who was still a bachelor and therefore condemned to choke down not a homemade delicacy but one of Mrs. Toosbury's Tasty Teatime Treats (sixpence the packet), Sergeant Heath said, "W'en ye've finished yer tea, 'op on yer cycle and tootle hup to the castle. 'Er ladyship's fainted again. Can't find 'er brooch."

"Hup that great 'ill just after me tea, sergeant?"

Sergeant Heath put down his tea mug. "Now see 'ere, me lad," he said in a fatherly tone, "ye're new to the Force yet, but ye've got to learn that juty's juty, and w'en juty calls, juty's got to be done, and that's that. Now 'ere's arf a crown. Stop by at Bromide's, the chemist's, and pick hup a packet of smellin' salts for 'er ladyship like a good lad."

"And wot do I do w'en I get to the castle?"

"W'y ye look himportant, ye say tut tut, ye arsk 'er ladyship w'en she larst saw 'er ruddy brooch, and scribble some rubbish in yer notebook. Then ye rummage about a bit and tell 'er you'll hinvestigate the matter with yer superior hofficer, namely me."

"That's it?"

"Yes, and keep yer eyes open. 'Er ladyship's maid, Valerie, is quite a dish. If I wasn't a married man—"

"Never mind, sergeant. I'll be off now."

"Good lad, and 'urry back."

Constable Gompers, a handsome, robust young chap, fitted his helmet carefully on his head, adjusted the chin strap, twirled his black mustache, strode to the door, and mounted his bicycle.

After stopping off at the chemist's, he started up the long hill to the castle, but the road soon became too steep, and in the end, he dismounted and wheeled his cycle up between the massive stone gateposts.

For countless centuries the Stoneleigh family had made the castle their home. A grotesque agglomeration of turrets, battlements, and chimney pots, which surely not one of its many architects would point to with pride, Castle Stoneleigh scowled defiantly down at the peaceful village of Nettlefield far below.

Constable Gompers carefully leaned his bicycle against the wall of the porte cochere and gave the bellpull a smart tug.

Then, twirling his mustache, he waited for the massive door to be opened.

At last it was.

"Ah, good afternoon, constable," said a butler. "Pray enter. Her ladyship is anticipating your arrival with impatience born of the keenest desire for your assistance. You may place your helmet there, on the tabouret to your right. Very good. Now, be so kind as to follow me."

What else could the bewildered constable do? He obeyed.

The butler, Barclay, led the way down a vast, high-ceilinged hall and knocked on a door at the end.

"What is it this time, Barclay?" bellowed a voice from within.

"Begging your lordship's pardon, but a certain police constable is here."

Instantly the door was flung open by a large bald man wearing spectacles. His complexion was so ruddy that he looked as if at any second he might explode, and indeed he did the minute he saw Constable Gompers standing in the hall.

"Police!" he shouted. "What the devil do you want?"

The constable stood his ground. "Sergeant 'Eath was hinformed 'er ladyship 'ad fainted at the discovery that 'er brooch was missin', yer lordship, and that she required some smellin' salts. 'Ere they are, sir," said Constable Gompers, proffering the packet. "I was halso sent to hinvestigate 'er ladyship's loss."

"Were you indeed?" retorted Sir Archibald, snatching the packet of smelling salts. "So now you'll huff and puff about and scribble some nonsense in your notebook. Then you'll leave, telling me you'll report your findings to your superior. Oh, I know all about it, and we'll probably never see the brooch again anyway, so don't waste any more of my time with your farcical charade. See him out, Barclay, and let me finish my tea in peace."

Behind Sir Archibald in the study, the constable saw Lady Lilly being served tea by a lovely blonde maid who, he realized at once, must be Valerie. After passing her ladyship a plateful of scones, Valerie turned for an instant towards the doorway. When she saw Constable Gompers, she smiled. So smitten was he at once that he failed to notice the silver tray and plates of tarts and sweets laid out for a sumptuous tea.

Before he knew what was happening, the door was slammed in his face and Barclay had shown him out of the castle.

In a dream of love, Constable Gompers freewheeled on his bicycle down the hill back to the police station.

Not long after the constable had left for the castle, Sergeant Heath had a visitor at the police station.

Mr. Cecil Bisby was quite breathless, either from excitement or from the speed with which he had cycled there—perhaps from both.

"Wot's hup, Mr. Bisby?" Sergeant Heath asked.

"Sir Harchibald's Rolls—in the bushes," Mr. Bisby puffed. "Roland's dead."

"Now 'old on there, Mr. Bisby. You say Sir Harchibald's car is in the bushes and Roland Weeler, 'is chauver, is *dead*?"

"Didn't move—didn't answer w'en I called 'im. Come see—just down by Squire Merton's."

Together they hurried the quarter mile on foot to the spot where the High Street took a sharp left-hand bend down the hill out of the village of Nettlefield.

"'Ow did you 'appen to see the Rolls?" Sergeant Heath asked as they trotted along.

"W'y, I was cyclin' back to me 'ome from the village, freew'eeelin' down the 'ill 'ere, just about to round the bend, w'en I spies some-thin' shinylike in them bushes, and w'en I goes to look, there's 'is lordship's car with Roland be'ind the w'eel, dead as can be."

As they walked alongside the brick wall at the edge of Squire Merton's estate, Mr. Bisby pointed to the grass.

"See 'ere, sergeant—tracks w'ere the Rolls must 'ave come down the 'ill, but hinstead of followin' the 'Igh Street right round to the left, these 'ere tracks runs straight down along the wall into them bushes. See w'ere the long grass 'as been rolled down by the w'eels?"

"Right, and there's the car."

Just as Mr. Bisby had said, in the shrubbery was Sir Archibald's favorite car, his dark green Rolls-Royce Phantom II Sedan de Ville.

The two men made their way through the bushes along the right side of the car and peered inside.

There, also just as Mr. Bisby had said, sitting behind the wheel, his chin on his chest, was Sir Archibald's chauffeur, Roland Wheeler. His hands were at the bottom of the steering wheel; his left foot rested on the floor to the left of the clutch pedal, his right foot to the right of the accelerator.

"Roland! I say, Roland, old chap, d'ye 'ear me?" Mr. Bisby called.

There was no response.

Mr. Bisby reached in and gently shook Wheeler's shoulder. The limp body fell sideways towards him.

"Hunconscious? Or dead, d'ye think, sergeant?"

"Pears to be quite dead to me, Mr. Bisby." The sergeant sighed.

"But wot's that packet on the seat?"

"Smellin' salts, by the look of it. Yes, from Bromide's, the chemist's. Never been hopened."

"Yes, p'raps Weeler was sent to fetch them for 'er ladyship. Uses an 'eap of 'em. Forever faintin', 'er ladyship is. But that's not tellin' us wot killed Weeler."

"No, it isn't, sergeant, nor do I see any signs of violence. No bullet 'oles, heverythin' in the car neat and tidy—but look 'ere, sergeant. See that red light? The hignition must still be switched on. I wonder—and look 'ere—she's still in top gear and 'is feet not doin' a ruddy thing to stop the car. So wot did stop 'er? The front w'eels mired to the 'ubs in the stream—that's wot stopped 'er, stalled 'er dead. Hmpf." Mr. Bisby rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "If you was to arsk me, sergeant, I'd say poor old Weeler was dead before hever the car got 'ere."

"Hegzackly me own thoughts. I see there's no dust on yer boots, either, Mr. Bisby."

"Helementary, me dear sergeant," Mr. Bisby chuckled. But then, in a more serious tone, he continued: "But the next question is who killed 'im?"

"The very same question 'ad hentered me own 'ead, Mr. Bisby, but we shan't find that out huntill the coroner's seen the body and told us wot caused 'is death. Then we can 'ave the car towed out and 'ave a better look round."

Mr. Bisby sighed.

"Bloomin' shame hit is, sergeant—W'eeler sittin' there dead in that lovely car. Always thought Roland was lucky to 'ave the job of drivin' 'er. Well, now it 'pears I'm the lucky one—jest to be ha-live—never mind drivin' such a lovely car."

"Quite right, Mr. Bisby, but think wot I've got to do."

"Wot's that, sergeant?"

"I've got to tell 'is lordship 'is chauver is dead and 'is car is stuck in a stream. 'E'll 'ave a proper fit, or I miss my guess."

Next morning at the police station Sergeant Heath looked perplexed.

"Wot do we do now, constable?" he asked. "That's the big question."

"Right," Constable Gompers agreed as he stared vacantly out the window.

"I arsked you a question, constable. Wot do we do now?"

"Right."

"Well?"

"Well, 'ow old would you say Miss Valerie is?"

"Oh, so that's it, is it? P'raps I shouldn't 'ave told you 'bout 'er."

"Lovely girl—lovely smile—lovely—" Constable Gompers sighed.

"There's no doubt 'bout that, me lad, but w'en you stop moonin' 'bout 'er, p'raps you could tend to juty and 'elp yer sergeant decide wot we do next. We still 'aven't got the coroner's report, so we don't know 'ow poor old W'eeler died, and 'er ladyship's brooch is still missin'." Sergeant Heath sighed. "It seems to me, constable, that you and I 'ave run hup hagainst two hinsurmountable hobjects, if you catch me drift."

"Quite right, sergeant. First, it's 'er ladyship's brooch is missin', and now it's 'ow did Roland W'eeler die."

"True. There's but one thought's hoccurred to me. Mr. Cecil Bisby 'pears to know a good deal too much for my likin'. I told you 'ow 'e fetched me to see 'is lordship's car in the bushes and told me 'ow 'e thought it 'ad all 'appened. Now, it seems to me, if 'e knew so much about it, p'raps 'e 'ad an 'and in it 'imself."

"Wot do ye mean, sergeant?"

"Wy, fer all we knows, 'e could 'ave killed Wheeler and be 'idin' the ruddy jewel right in 'is 'ouse this very minute."

That gave Constable Gompers something else beside Valerie to think about, and while he did just that, Sergeant Heath picked up the telephone.

In Basingstoke, not many miles away, Mr. George Streatham answered.

"Why bless my soul, Sergeant Heath, how are you?" he said. "Keeping fit, I trust? Things running smoothly, are they? . . . Ah, that's a pity. Anything Frank and I can do to help? . . . Why, yes, of course we could, no trouble at all, old chap. How about meeting at the Cock and Bull tomorrow morning at, say, ten o'clock? . . . You'd rather meet at your police station? Quite understandable. Splendid! Frank sends his regards. . . . See you in the morning, then. Cheerio!"

George and Frank arrived promptly next day at the Nettlefield Police Station.

On seeing the two Streatham brothers for the first time, one might be reminded of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, for these two dumpy gentlemen looked so very much like Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum that one might be tempted to laugh at them.

That would be a mistake.

Any study of the secret files of Scotland Yard would reveal a significant number of cases in which the Streatham brothers' uncanny perspicacity and inscrutable logic had helped police throughout the Empire to untangle some of the knottiest problems.

For example, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer lost the key to the Bank of England and couldn't get in, who found that key lying on the pavement outside of Number Ten Downing Street?

Who saved Britain's proudest and newest aircraft carrier, *Ark Royal*, from being torpedoed by one of the Royal Navy's own submarines?

And who thwarted that dastardly plot to introduce a thousand screeching macaws into the Houses of Parliament on Opening Day?

The answer? The Streatham brothers, George and Frank.

And now, here they were, ready to take on another case—to try to help Sergeant Heath and Constable Gompers overcome their "hinsurmountable hobjects."

"Well, well," said George when they were comfortably seated in the police station, "why don't you chaps put us in the picture here?"

When both policemen had done that, Sergeant Heath heaved a sigh and admitted that he was baffled.

"Huntill we get the coroner's report, we don't know 'ow Roland Wheeler died, and we 'ave no trace of the brooch, w'ich is a ruddy great thing worth all the gold in the Hempire, from wot I've 'eard."

"Well, sergeant, do you think that Roland Wheeler's death and the disappearance of Lady Stoneleigh's brooch are somehow connected?" Frank asked.

"Oh yes, I do hindeed, sir. If the coroner was to find a bullet wound in Roland Wheeler's body, or poison in 'is system, I would immejately arrest Mr. Cecil Bisby and search 'is 'ouse for the brooch." The sergeant paused, and then added, "Now, you hunderstand, sir, neither the constable nor I believe Mr. Bisby would do such a thing, but as hofficers of the constabulary, we 'ave to consider hevery possibility, don't we, sir?"

"Yes, of course. But when do you think he might have killed Wheeler?"

"Well, sir, if the coroner was to find 'e was shot, Mr. Bisby could 'ave done 'im in w'en 'e first found the Rolls, before 'e came to fetch me, sir."

"When he found the car stalled in the stream?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well now, sergeant," Frank intervened, "let us pursue your theory. You said Wheeler's left foot was on the floor beside the clutch pedal and his right foot was on the floor beside the accelerator pedal. Both his hands were resting at the bottom of the steering wheel. In short, he was doing nothing, either by pressing with his right foot on the brake pedal, to slow the car, or with his hands, to steer the car around the bend, so the car went straight ahead into the bushes and finally settled in the stream. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"But if he did nothing to control the car, he must have been dead or at least unconscious *before* the car stalled in the stream. If anybody had tried to kill him, they'd have had to do it before the car started out of the village of Nettlefield because, as I remember it, the High Street dips down just as it leaves the village."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant agreed. "If some bloke 'ad tried to shoot Wheeler in the village, heverybody would 'ave 'eard it. But wot habout poison, sir—wot habout that packet of smellin' salts? Maybe it wasn't smellin' salts after all, sir."

"Ah, now you're grasping at straws, sergeant. You said earlier that the packet had never been opened. No, it seems to me that Roland Wheeler was sent to the chemist's to fetch the smelling salts, and not to the jeweler to fetch the brooch."

"So you think the brooch was never in the car and Cecil Bisby never could 'ave killed Wheeler to steal it, sir?"

"Right."

Sergeant Heath heaved a sigh of relief. "Well, sir, I'm glad to 'ear you say that because I couldn't arrest Mr. Bisby no matter wot. But then, sir, we're right back to w'ere we started—who did kill Wheeler, and 'ow, sir?"

"I don't know. We'll simply have to wait for the coroner's report. In the meantime, it seems to me that you chaps should interrogate the servants at Stoneleigh Castle as well as Mr. Pinsley, the jeweler."

"Mr. Pinsley, sir?"

"Yes, he might tell you when he last saw the brooch. Perhaps it was sent to him for cleaning."

"Yes, sir. You're habsolutely right. We could do with a bit more information. The constable and I will set to work immejately. Constable, you go to the castle. P'raps yer lady-friend Valerie can be really useful. I'll take on Mr. Pinsley."

"Splendid," said George. "Frank and I can spend the night at that comfortable little inn, the Cock and Bull, and return here in the morning. Come along, Frank. I fancy we may be just in time to indulge in one of the inn's specialties—a delicious cold chicken and beef pie washed down with some of their excellent stout."

When the Streatham brothers arrived at the police station the following morning, Sergeant Heath greeted them with news of a surprising development.

"'Is lordship just called to say the brooch 'as been found, sir."

"Oh, I say, that's capital news!" George exclaimed.

"Where was it found?" Frank asked.

"'Is lordship seemed quite hembarrassed, sir," Sergeant Heath chuckled. "'E said 'er ladyship was wearin' it, sir."

"Wearing it, and nobody noticed it?"

"'Is lordship said 'er ladyship noticed it after Constable Gompers 'ad left on 'is first visit, sir."

"And he waited until this morning to tell you? Jolly decent of him, I must say," George remarked sarcastically. "Well, if they

found the brooch, the case is closed."

"No, George. Let's hear what you found out yesterday on your second trip to the castle, constable."

The constable cleared his throat nervously and then, referring constantly to his notes, he said, "Yes, sir. I first hinterviewed Mr. Barclay, the butler. 'E's been with 'is lordship for ten years—butler to 'is lordship's father, who died two years hago. Seemed quite honest, sir. Then Celia, the scullery maid, and Mr. Weed, the gardener—they 'adn't much to say, but they all liked Mrs. Broyle ever since she arrived—"

"Mrs. Broyle?"

"The new cook, sir. She harrived on the Monday, Valerie thinks, after 'is lordship 'ad given the old cook, Mrs. Treekl, the sack, sir."

"What was the exact date of Mrs. Broyle's arrival?"

"Yes, sir, that would be nine June, sir, but from wot Valerie said, 'er ladyship gave 'er Wednesdays off, sir."

"Wednesdays—starting when?"

"Eleven June, sir, and she went to 'er 'ome in Basingstoke then and on eighteen June, sir, but she stayed at the castle on twenty-five June—yesterday—because she told Valerie she felt sicklike, sir."

"So after she arrived, she went twice to Basingstoke, once on eleven June, and again on eighteen June, but she stayed at the castle on twenty-five June—yesterday. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did she get along with Valerie and the rest of the staff?"

"Oh, champion, sir. Valerie said she was ever so friendly—liked Valerie most particular, Valerie said Mrs. Broyle told 'er. Valerie showed 'er the brooch and told 'er 'ow it 'ad been 'anded down from one generation to hanother, sir."

"Did Valerie show her where the brooch was kept?"

"Yes, she did, sir."

"She shouldn't have done that," George said.

"No, sir. I told Valerie that, but she said she trusted Mrs. Broyle and she did tell 'er not to tell anybody she'd told 'er, sir."

Frank and George looked at one another. Then Frank asked Constable Gompers if he had interviewed Mrs. Broyle.

"No, sir. I went into the kitchen to hask 'er some questions, but she wouldn't talk to me, sir—quite rude to me she was, sir, but I did see 'er. Bright red 'air. Very large woman—must weigh thirteen stone in 'er birthday suit, if you'll pardon the hexpression, sir."

"Bright red hair?" George asked.

"Oh yes, sir. Big mop of red 'air—looked like a bloomin' 'ouse afire, sir."

"Could be a wig, Frank," said George.

"A new disguise, George?" asked Frank.

"Quite," said George.

There was a moment's silence, and then Frank said:

"Now see here, you two. It looks as if this Mrs. Broyle is not Mrs. Broyle at all. If she is who we think she is, her real name is Cynthia Small. She's not a cook, either. She's a professional jewel thief masquerading as a cook, and there's no doubt she's planning to steal Lady Stoneleigh's brooch. She's wanted very badly by Scotland Yard, who have been trailing her for months. Now, if you two chaps play your cards properly, you should be able to catch her, and if you could help to put her behind bars, there's no doubt you'd both be recommended for promotions."

Frank paused to let his words sink in.

"Blimey, sir," said Sergeant Heath, "that would be grand!"

But Constable Gompers looked quite distressed.

"Beggin' yer pardon, sir," he asked, "you don't think, bein' as Mrs. Broyle is a burglar, that Valerie is in any danger, do you?"

"Oh, no fear of that, but as long as Cynthia Small is there, that brooch is in danger."

"P'raps, sir, I should send Constable Gompers up to the castle to keep an eye on things?" Sergeant Heath suggested.

"A splendid idea!" George agreed.

But Frank was not so enthusiastic. "Hold on a moment," he cautioned. "If she sees a policeman there, she won't do anything. If you're to arrest her, you must catch her in the act. She knows where the brooch is, she's a professional thief—she'll steal the brooch sooner or later, and that's when you must catch her." Frank paused. "There's only one thing that bothers me about this entire affair. She must know that it is a very famous jewel that any jeweler would recognize. She could never sell it without an inquiry being started."

"But, Frank, she could break it up and sell the individual jewels."

"Only an expert could do that, George."

"Mr. Pinsley's a hexpert, sir," Sergeant Heath spoke up. "But of course she'd never take it to 'im, bein' as 'e knows the brooch."

"That's true," George agreed, "but tell us, what did you find out from Mr. Pinsley?"

"Well, sir, first off, 'e said the brooch was in 'is shop just before larst Christmas. Lady Stoneleigh brought it in on five December. She wanted it cleaned so she could wear it to Squire Merton's Christmas ball. Mr. Pinsley cleaned it and telephoned 'er that it was ready, and she sent Roland Wheeler to fetch it. That was fifteen December, Mr. Pinsley said, and it was the last time 'e saw it, sir."

"Well then, that definitely explodès your theory, sergeant. Wheeler didn't go to pick it up the day he died. Mr. Bisby couldn't have stolen the brooch because it was in the castle, not in the car."

"That's right, sir, thank 'eavens," Sergeant Heath agreed. "And I'm glad 'e didn't steal it. But Mr. Pinsley gave me some more hinformation, sir. 'E said 'is son Derek went quite hoften to Basingstoke, sir. As a matrofact, sir, 'e told me 'is son went on the Wednesdays 'e 'elps 'is dad out 'ere in the shop, but they close hup shop on the Wednesdays and that's w'en Derek usually drives hup to Basingstoke in 'is old Morris Cowley, sir."

"Was Derek in Basingstoke on the same days Mrs. Broyle went home to Basingstoke?"

"As a matrofact, sir, 'e was. I 'ave it right 'ere, sir. 'E was in Basingstoke on eleven June and eighteen June, but not yesterday, sir, twenty-five June. Yesterday 'e was 'ere in Nettlefield, sir."

"So," Frank summed up, "Derek Pinsley and Cynthia Small were both in Basingstoke on eleven June and eighteen June and both were here yesterday. I find that quite significant, don't you, George?"

"Quite," said George. "I wonder how much Mr. Derek Pinsley knows about breaking up brooches."

But before anyone could make any further remark, the telephone rang.

Sergeant Heath answered it, then held it out to George.

"It's for you, sir," he said.

George took the instrument and said, "George Streatham here. . . . Yes, sir. . . . Four o'clock sharp at Arch House? Yes, sir, we'll be there. Good day, sir."

George turned to Frank. "Lord Conklin. More trouble at the Admiralty."

"Not again, surely?"

"It looks that way. Meeting at Arch House at four. Sorry, you chaps, we'll have to leave straight away."

"Yes, it'll take us a good three hours to drive to London," Frank agreed. "But I think your case here is quite cut and dried. Watch

out for Cynthia—she's a cagey bird, doubtless in with young Pinsky. Give us a ring if you need any further help."

"Yes, sorry to leave you chaps in the lurch, so to speak," George added.

"That's quite all right. You gentlemen 'ave been of henormous 'elp to us. Constable Gompers and I will be on guard against that Small woman, never fear, sir."

"She's got a lot of tricks, so do be careful," Frank warned.

The large kitchen clock in Stoneleigh Castle showed five to four. In five minutes Barclay, the butler, would arrive with a tray to take tea to the study for Lord Archibald and Lady Lilly.

Mrs. Broyle, the cook, put some freshly made scones on one plate; on another she carefully arranged four gooseberry tarts. As she lavishly sprinkled them with sugar, a smile spread across her face. That should do it, she thought.

Precisely on schedule, Barclay arrived from the pantry and placed both plates on the tray.

"Mrs. Broyle," he exclaimed, "what tantalizing tidbits you do create. Those tarts will most assuredly titillate his lordship's palate. However," he added, "I trust you've not been so indiscreet as to put sugar on them as you have done twice previously. You certainly cannot have forgotten the quite violent reaction which those apparently small errors provoked in his lordship."

"Oh no, Mr. Barclay," replied Mrs. Broyle, smiling. "I'll not forget his lordship's tantrums. I thought he would sack me then and there."

"Ah, but in spite of those tantrums, I believe his lordship values you for your—if I may put it so—your quite remarkable culinary talents. He would indeed, I'm quite certain, be loath to dismiss you—unless, of course, circumstances were to warrant such action."

Mrs. Broyle turned on her most charming smile. "A word to the wise is sufficient, Mr. Barclay," she answered.

"Quite," Barclay replied. He picked up the tray, put it on the trolley, and trundled it out the kitchen door into the hall, heading for the study.

Quickly Mrs. Broyle removed her apron and hurried up the back stairs. She knew that Barclay and Valerie would be helping with the tea in the study. Celia was scouring pots in the scullery, and

Mr. Weed, the gardner, was trimming the kitchen garden hedge. The coast was clear.

She made her way through a maze of hallways to her ladyship's boudoir. There, she deftly inserted a hairpin in to the lock on the brooch's case, opened its cover, and removed the precious jewel. Clutching it to her bosom, she hurried back to her room. She locked the door and removed from a bureau drawer a rather grubby cardboard box. One side bore the label "Solex Carburetor Model 3 PB." Below that, hastily scribbled, was a note: "Derek, hope this works better than old S.U. carb on your Morris. Ed." She opened the box, slipped the jewel inside, and replaced the cover.

From a closet she took a tan suitcase already partly packed with her own clothes. She squeezed the box into place and snapped the case closed.

She then placed on her bed another suitcase, a battered black affair held together with straps. Into this she carefully packed a pair of men's trousers, a shirt, a necktie, a vizored cap, a jacket, and a pair of shoes. She strapped the suitcase closed, unlocked the door, picked up both cases and made her way downstairs.

Just as she entered the kitchen, she heard Sir Archibald shouting.

"Barclay, where is that cook? Egad, I'll teach that wench not to put sugar in my gooseberry tart again!"

He stormed into the kitchen followed closely by Barclay.

"You're fired, Mrs. Broyle!" Sir Archibald roared. "Twice I've told you that I want a gooseberry *tart*, not some saccharine mush. Now get out!"

Mrs. Broyle was not a weak woman, nor was her temperament mild. She was, in fact, a large and powerfully built woman endowed with a shock of red hair and a disposition to match. After listening to his lordship's brief tirade, she picked up a heavy skillet and felled him with it. As Barclay was helping his lordship to his feet, she took up her bags and walked out the front door of Stoneleigh Castle, down the long hill towards Nettlefield.

Mr. Cecil Bisby appeared at the police station, out of breath again.

"I say, sergeant, somethin' very odd 'appened at the railway station just now. A woman walked into the ladies' loo and a man comes out, wand—"

"Come, come, Mr. Bisby, if a lady walked into the ladies' loo, 'ow come a man walks out, and w'y would a man go into the ladies' loo in the first place?"

"Can't say, sergeant. But the woman was carryin' a tan suitcase and a black suitcase w'en she went in, and the man was carryin' the same two suitcases w'en 'e came out, so 'elp me."

"Wot did the woman look like, Mr. Bisby?"

"Big woman, gray skirt, blue blouse."

"And the man who came out?"

"Medium-sized bloke, blue suit, cap. If you was to arsk me, sergeant, I'd say the woman went in, changed to the man's clothes, and came out."

"You mean you think it's the same person, a woman in man's clothes, or maybe it was a man went in dressed like a woman and a man came out?"

"W'ichever it was, it's a mystery. Nobody else at all was near the station, so it must be the same person."

"The woman didn't 'ave red 'air, by any chance, did she?" Constable Gompers asked.

"As a matrofact, I think she did, yes."

Sergeant Heath became alert at once.

"Come on, constable, it must be the Small woman!" he exclaimed, seizing his helmet and running towards the door.

"The woman as went in wasn't small, sergeant, she was—"

But Mr. Bisby was talking to an empty police station.

Mr. Eric Pinsley, a widower, following in the footsteps of three generations of Pinsleys, was the owner of Pinsley & Son, Ltd., which for the same three (or perhaps more) generations had been the only jewelry shop in Nettlefield, or indeed in the whole of Garpenden County.

Unfortunately, young Derek Pinsley, much to his father's distress, showed not the slightest inclination to follow in his ancestors' footsteps. Although he often helped his father in the shop, and had gained some knowledge of the trade, he spent most of his time tinkering with an ancient Morris Cowley motor car, a cantankerous beast which was almost impossible to start, and completely impossible to stop. (Indeed, pressing on the accelerator seemed to slow her down, while pressing on the brake pedal only speeded her up.)

In this dilapidated contraption Derek frequently drove to Basingstoke, but what he did there or whom he saw, he never revealed, and his father was much too busy minding the shop to question his son.

But then, on Thursday, June twenty-sixth, something happened that made Mr. Eric Pinsley realize that he should have paid more attention to his son's activities.

At five o'clock that day, Mr. Pinsley was just beginning to close the shop when Derek suggested that he finish the job for his father.

"Why don't you go home, Dad," he said. "I'll close up for you. I'm expecting a pal to drop by with a new carburetor for the Morris. I'll lock up for you."

Such a generous offer from such a normally selfish son gave the father pause.

"A pal?" he asked.

But there was no time for explanation because just at that moment someone appeared in the door. What both Pinsleys beheld was a large, rotund figure wearing an ill-fitting dark blue suit and a vizored cap. In each hand, this person carried a suitcase, one tan, the other black.

"Ah, here's Ed now," Derek said. "Hello, Ed. Glad to see you arrived early. This is my dad, Dad, Ed."

"Good afternoon, sir," Ed wheezed in a low, gasping voice.

Then, much to Mr. Pinsley's horror, Ed hoisted onto the glass showcase the tan suitcase and proceeded to open it.

"There you go, Derek old bean," Ed wheezed as he handed over a cardboard box.

"Good show, Ed. How much do I owe you?"

"Special to you, old chum, five pounds, ten, and six."

"A bargain," replied Derek, reaching into his pocket.

"I'm not quite so sure about that."

It was the voice of Sergeant Heath. Followed by Constable Gompers, he strode into the shop and, seeing the box, removed its cover and looked inside.

"Well, well," he said, "that should make the old Morris fly."

According to the long-awaited coroner's report, Roland Wheeler, at the age of eighty-five, had died of a heart attack.

At the funeral Lady Lilly fainted twice, and a tear was reported to have trickled down his lordship's cheek. His head was still bandaged.

Afterwards he drove himself to the police station to collect the brooch and to thank the two policemen for recovering it for him.

"Not really due to us, Sir Archibald," Sergeant Heath declared. "Indeed?"

"No, sir. Mr. Cecil Bisby's the one as should be thanked, sir."

"I don't understand."

"Haccording to 'im, sir, from 'is kitchen window, 'e saw yer cook, Mrs. Broyle, who is really Cynthia Small, go into the ladies' loo at the railway station carryin' two suitcases. Five minutes later, a man comes out carryin' the same two suitcases. Well, sir, Mr. Bisby, 'e thought that a bit odd, so 'e 'urried hup 'ere and told us about it, and that was that, sir."

"I see. Am I correct in assuming that this Mr. Bisby is at present without a job, sergeant?"

"That you are, sir."

"Well, as I am now without a chauffeur, I shall have to confer with Mr. Bisby."

The two policemen were not really surprised, therefore, when a fortnight later they saw a dark green Rolls-Royce Phantom II glide past the police station and noticed Lady Lilly sitting in the back seat and Mr. Cecil Bisby at the wheel. What did surprise them was the discreet growl from the Klaxon horn as the car passed; they saw no obstruction in the car's way.

When the Streatham brothers had set the Admiralty straight (a matter of only a few hours), they returned home to Basingstoke the next day.

After lunch they received a call from Sergeant Heath inviting them down to Nettlefield next morning. They accepted and arrived at the police station at about ten.

Sergeant Heath filled them in with the details of the arrests he and Constable Gompers had made, and then Frank began a discussion of the case.

"On the whole," he said, "you chaps have done a good job, and I'm sure that now you've put Cynthia Small behind bars, your efforts will be rewarded by recommendations for promotions."

"Well, that's good news hindeed, sir," Sergeant Heath declared, "but I've a few questions, sir."

"I don't wonder. There are a lot of strange things about this case."

"Yes, sir. Fer hinstance, wot were young Mr. Pinsley and the Small woman doin' together in Basingstoke, sir?"

"Perhaps Derek Pinsley wanted to steal the brooch himself but didn't know how to go about it. By chance he met Cynthia Small, discovered her interest in jewels, and persuaded her to get a job at Stoneleigh Castle, steal the brooch, and bring it to him at the shop in Nettlefield. There, he could break it up into bits and pieces which they could then both sell. Together in Basingstoke, on the Wednesdays, they must have planned the theft, but of course getting the brooch to him was the trickiest bit. I suppose it was her idea to disguise herself as his pal Ed, bringing him a new carburetor for his car. She'd once been on the stage, you know, and that's the kind of trick she would think of."

"Yes, Frank," George said, "but how could she have failed to realize that someone like Mr. Bisby might notice her coming out of the women's toilet at the station dressed as a man, carrying the same two suitcases she went in with? That's when she went too far and got careless."

"Oh, she went too far at the castle, too, sir," Constable Gompers added. "Valerie told me Barclay told 'er Sir Harchibald fired 'er fer puttin' too much sugar in 'is gooseberry tart for the third time, sir, so she 'it Sir Harchibald with a skillet, and—"

"She hit Sir Archibald with a skillet?" George exclaimed.

"Oh yes, hindeed she did, sir, with a w'oppin' great skillet, sir, and then, w'ile Barclay took 'is lordship hup to 'is bed, Mrs. Broyle skipped out, sir."

"With the brooch, of course," Frank said.

"In the Solex Carburetor box," George added.

"Yes," Frank agreed. "But there's one thing that intrigues me about this case."

"You mean, sir, w'ere I went wrong thinkin' that Weeler's death 'ad somethin' to do with 'er ladyship's missin' brooch, sir?" Sergeant Heath asked.

"Yes. Actually, it was quite a natural mistake. So little normally happens in this peaceful village that when, first, her ladyship loses her priceless brooch, and then, at the same time, a chauffeur is found dead behind the wheel of his lordship's favorite Rolls-Royce mired in a streambed—why, quite understandably you linked the two incidents together, but of course now we know they had nothing at all to do with each other."

"Yes, and that almost got me pal Bisby into a spot of trouble, too, didn't it, sir?"

"Almost," Frank agreed. "But that's all water under the bridge now."

A year later, the British Empire was still standing, Britannia still ruled the waves, and Bertie Wooster was attempting to wheedle another couple of hundred quid out of his Aunt Agatha.

And in the police station at Nettlefield, a telephone rang—yes, at teatime.

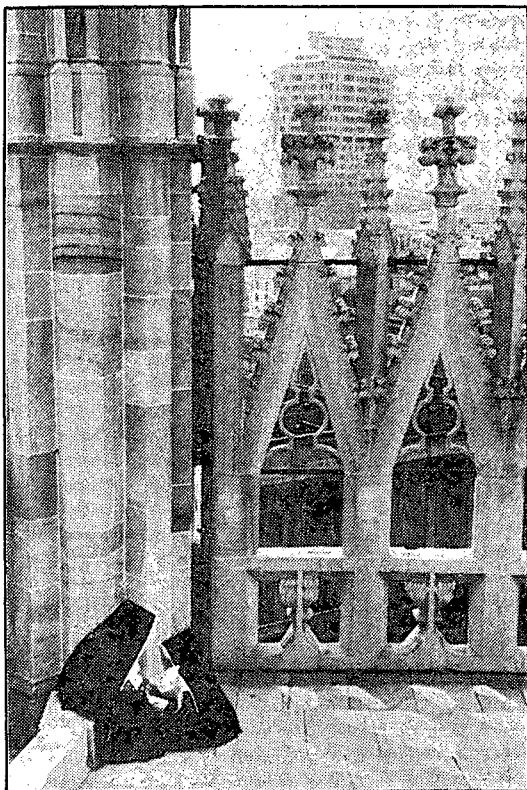
But did Inspector Heath answer it? No. Quite complacently he munched a delicious homemade crumpet and calmly sipped his tea.

Sergeant Gompers answered the telephone.

"Nettlefield Pleece, Const—Sergeant Gompers 'ere. . . . Oh, it's you, is it, Mrs. Gompers? Well, I've a question for ye, me love. W'y do ye make them lovely scones fer me tea, then ring me hup just at teatime, so's I can't henjoy them? W'y, I might as well go back to eatin' Mrs. Toosbury's Tasty Teatime Treats. . . . No, of course I wouldn't do that, love, you know—"

On and on it went, but Inspector Heath merely smiled to himself. After all, when there were helpful chaps like the Streatham brothers about, a policeman's lot was not so bad.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Top secret. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "November Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

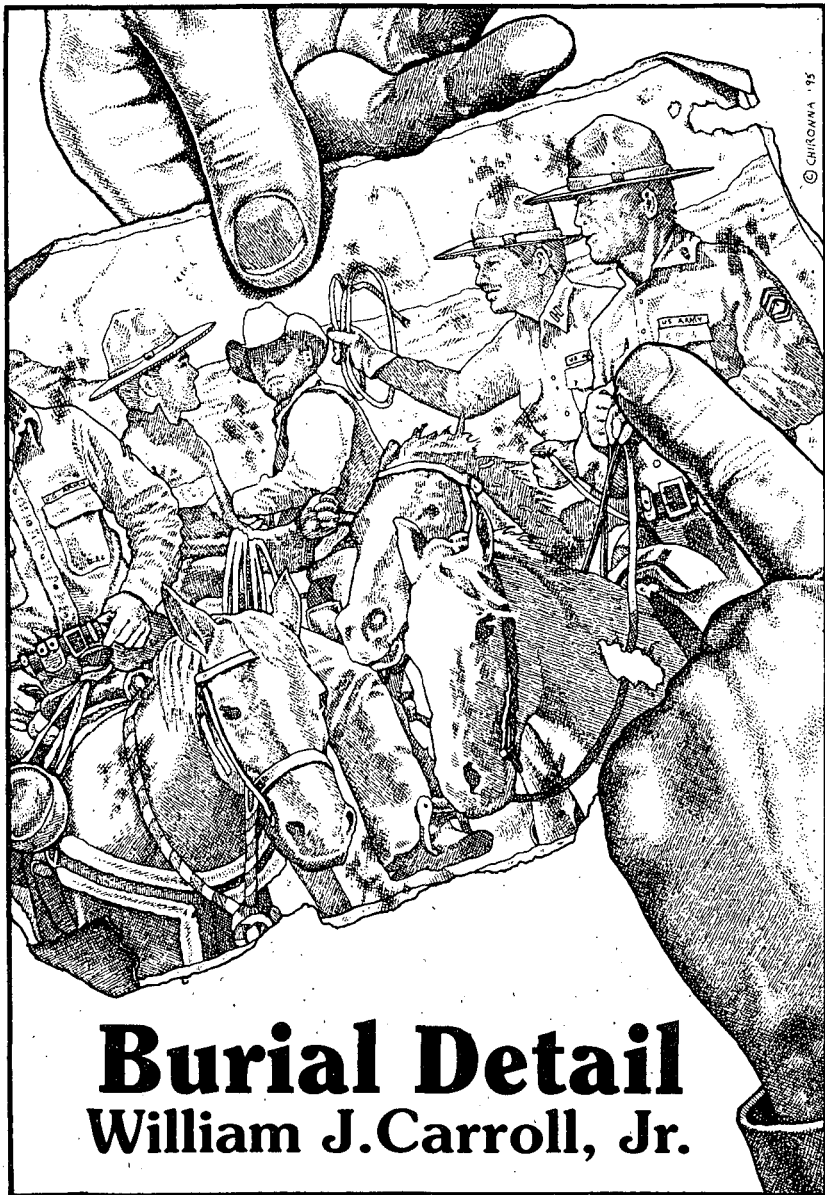


Illustration by Ron Chirónna

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remember today, and to whom we bid our last farewell."

An old man in a pew near the front had begun to weep.

Reminding me of what I was supposed to be doing.

I said, "Bill Kravet was my friend and he saved my life, but all these others . . ." and here I read the names and ranks from the long list the chaplain had given me ". . . these other old soldiers are also bonded with me and with all other soldiers past, present, and future."

A young woman next to the weeping old man put a hand on his arm, which made him weep more.

I looked down at my notes, feeling the hypocrisy suddenly hit home.

I said, "The tragedy of the deaths of these men is a hard thing for us all, but I know that I don't feel the pain many of you feel. These were your husbands, fathers, and brothers—and your loss is far sharper than my own."

Which may have been the understatement of the year, but I said it straight and continued.

"Bill Kravet outlived his own family and I am only his friend, but I was not his only friend." I nodded again toward the coffins. "These other old soldiers with whom he'd shared the last few years of his life were also

his friends, and the grief that I do feel is helped by the knowledge that it was with friends that he died."

I felt suddenly a little sick.

"And not alone," I finished.

I came to attention then and saluted, while taps were played by a bugler in the back of the chapel.

And when he'd finished, it was all over, and I led the exodus from the church, feeling pretty damned uncomfortable about it.

Outside in the blazing sunlight I stood next to the chaplain—a young priest named Ricci—as teams of pallbearers began moving their burdens to the cars that lined the street and mourners milled on the lawn. Many of them stopped to shake my hand and thank me, while I kept pretending to be one of them.

"You did very well," Ricci told me as one group of mourners moved away.

I looked at him.

"It caught just the right note, I think."

"Really."

He smiled. "It wasn't that bad, was it?"

I said nothing.

"Well," he said. "I think it was fine."

I thought it had been the most hypocritical piece of work

“William Henry Kravet, First Sergeant, United States Army, saved my life,” I told the crowd of mourners, some of whom looked up at me from the rows of pews in front of where I stood, some of whom didn’t.

“In 1973, in a place called Phu Bai, the helicopter in which we were both passengers was hit by ground fire. We crashed and burned. The pilot, copilot, and crew chief were killed. I was knocked out and had a broken shoulder.” I paused, remembering. “Bill Kravet saved me.”

My voice carried well in the small chapel, the arched roof reflecting my words into all corners, and I felt a certain theatrical power. The chaplain, standing below me and to my right, glanced my way and nodded.

I said, “At the risk of his own life, under intense enemy fire, he dragged me out.” I paused for effect. “This man—an old soldier even then with nearly thirty years’ service behind him—put me on his back and carried me to safety. For which action Bill Kravet received the Silver Star.” I smiled. “And, as you might imagine, my gratitude and friendship.”

Sweat began to pool inside my uniform. It was Texas in

July, and the standing fans along the sides of the chapel weren’t getting the job done. On top of which the chapel was packed; from the MP’s in their Class-A’s standing at parade rest in the rear to the two hundred or so mourners who’d filled every seat to the fourteen flag-draped coffins arrayed along the front.

“But,” I went on, “it’s more than just gratitude to my good friend that I feel at this moment.”

Hand-held fans and hankies were out, waving and wiping like crazy as I turned to the second page of my little speech to find out what I was feeling, aside from melted.

“What I feel most strongly at this moment is the bond of soldiers who have been in battle together.”

Someone coughed, and a few others aped him.

“Soldiers,” I said, “who have walked together into the path of death. Soldiers who have felt the fear of facing an enemy, who feels the same way. Soldiers of all armies, of all nations, of all times, who have gone out from their homes, gone out from their families, and fought an enemy at the risk of their own lives.” I opened my hands to indicate the row of coffins. “It is a bond I feel with all these whom we

I'd ever done, but I still said nothing, concentrating on keeping up the act as another couple of mourners came up to us and I went back to handshaking, you're welcoming, and "I'm-very-sorry."

The sun beat down on my head like punishment.

It took a while—forever it seemed to me—but finally the last of the two hundred or so people who had filled the chapel had moved past. Along the street the MP's were organizing the caravan of cars that would be the funeral procession.

"I hope they're not going to follow us there," Ricci sighed.

He meant the clutch of media people who stood on the sidewalk, their cameras clicking, flashing, and whirring.

"It's what they do," I told him.

"I suppose," he agreed sadly.

But this, I thought, would be the last of it.

The story of the VA hospital fire that had killed fifteen aged vets in their sleep had flashed to national brilliance a week ago but was now just a dying flame and would soon go dark. The mass funeral at the Fort Hood cemetery would be the last flicker, but cameras would record it, and reporters would report it. It was what they did, and they'd do it.

But I wouldn't be there.

"So," Ricci said to me, "you'll be leaving, then?"

"Yes, sir."

He nodded and frowned. "Bill was a very troubled man, Mr. Virginiak. Which is something I see a lot of in men of his age."

"Really."

"They think back over their lives, and all they see is failure. Things they regret having done. Things they want to put right."

I nodded, thinking Bill Kra-vet had a lot to be troubled over, more than most and at any age, and would have had to live a second life to put right all that he'd done wrong.

"I think," Ricci added quietly, "Bill had something he wanted to confess to me, but for some reason he wouldn't." He smiled. "I also have no idea why he was so adamant about not being interred here at Fort Hood."

"He said nothing at all to you about what he wanted done?"

"No," he replied. "He only said that it should be left to you."

Right, I thought.

And then, as if on cue, Ricci's assistant emerged from the chapel and came up to him with a black shoebox-sized carton, saying, "The car's ready, sir."

Ricci took the box from him and handed it to me, made the

sign of the cross over it, smiled at me, nodded, and left.

Left me with the earthly remains of William Henry Kravet, but without a clue what to do with them.

Back at my motel by noon, I confirmed my return flight to Tacoma—ETD 1800—which left me with a long afternoon yet to play out in Killeen but without much heart for doing anything, so I stayed put in my room for a while giving some thought to Bill's ashes, without much result.

The trouble being, in part, that I'd barely known the man.

Or rather, what I knew of him I didn't like, and the fact that he'd saved my life hadn't been enough for me to overcome that dislike to get to know him better.

On the other hand, I don't think there was much more to know about him than I did.

William Henry Kravet, First Sergeant, United States Army—deceased.

Unabashed bigot and sadistic bully. I'd known him to be a Klan member and a card-carrying American Nazi—which would not have surprised anyone knowing his views on non-white non-Christians, as was my own misfortune.

A humorless, violent man, he'd nevertheless been what a

different generation would have called a good soldier.

An aggressive, effective, and more or less fearless killer, he'd seen combat in a variety of theaters and might have had what is called a "distinguished" career if he hadn't ended it in 1975 under less than distinguished circumstances.

Court-martialed in Korea for beating a prostitute half to death, he'd missed a dishonorable discharge and imprisonment only because the woman he'd braindamaged with his fists could no longer see or speak very well and thus could not identify him at his trial.

Which I'd attended as a "character witness" for the defense.

Not guilty had been the official finding, but he'd been retired immediately afterward, there being no doubt about his actual guilt, and he hadn't fought it.

In fact, the last time I'd seen him was there in Seoul in an NCO Club after the trial, after he'd been told that his retirement would be processed forthwith.

Where he bragged to me about having "roughed up" women every place he'd been "whether they needed it or not," and called me a "faggot" for not thinking it funny—and

that was the man to whom I owed my life!

So it came as no real surprise at all to learn that he'd put me down as next of kin, that he would die with no one to mourn him.

How else could he die?

But what on earth had he expected me to do with his ashes?

Around one o'clock I decided I didn't know and I was tired of thinking about it, so I got out of uniform and into swim trunks and put myself down on a beach chair by the pool where I spent some time working on my tan and reading Dostoyevsky.

Notes from Underground.

A dismal, degrading confession that halfway through it I put down because I found myself suddenly speaking my own thoughts in that same merciless style—and no one needs to know that much truth about himself—and then I went for a swim.

A short, hard fit of exercise that left me huffing and puffing.

And I'd just put myself back on my chair thinking it was time for some lunch when out of the corner of my eye I saw a cop in plainclothes.

Leaving the motel from the back, coming up onto the pool deck looking my way, walking

straight over to where I was sitting.

"Mr. Virginiak?" he said.

"Yes."

"My name's Nick Johnson," he told me, extending his hand. "I saw you at the services this afternoon."

We shook hands, and I waved him to a chair nearby.

"Father Ricci told me how to find you," he said.

I nodded, looking him over, trying to explain my hunch about his profession but failing.

All I saw was a young man—thirtyish, tall, muscular looking under the cotton pullover he wore, with straight black hair cut short. Sunglasses covered his eyes, which were brown, and his just-short-of-handsome face was quite dark from the sun.

He also sported a pretty terrible scar over his right temple.

Johnson smiled. "I'm a deputy sheriff, Mr. Virginiak. Juachita County Sheriff's Department." He nodded over his shoulder in a westerly direction. "That's in New Mexico."

I nodded back, thinking that something about his walk or demeanor—a cross between proprietary and questioning—had said it to me.

"Are you a relative of . . ."

"No," he told me quickly. "I'm not a relative, but . . ." He

cocked his head slightly and smiled. "That was quite a eulogy you gave."

"Thank you."

He nodded appreciatively. "The idea of soldiers sharing a bond throughout time. I thought that was very profound."

I nodded, not because I thought he was right but because I was tired and that's how my head felt like moving.

He frowned at me. "Is it true?"

"What?"

He smiled again. "What you said. Do you really feel that bond?"

"Well . . ."

"With all soldiers, of all nations—past and present?"

I didn't know where this was going, but I didn't want to offend him with the truth, so I said, "Pretty much, I suppose."

He looked thoughtful. "But—wouldn't it depend—on the man, I mean?"

It did, but I'd trapped myself. "I don't think so," I told him.

"I mean," he went on, "Hitler was a soldier."

Right, I thought. "Right," I said.

"So—wouldn't it make a difference?"

"I think," I told him, "the bond I was speaking of is value-neutral. I don't think it discriminates." I shrugged. "On

the other hand, it is not the most important measure of a man as far as I'm concerned."

"So," he said deliberately, "you'd feel that bond, even with, say, an enemy?"

I deserved this, I told myself. "I think it exists," I told him, then I laughed. "What's all this about?"

"Even with an enemy?" he persisted.

I sighed a what's-your-point sigh at him and said, "Probably. I don't know. Is there a problem here?"

He stared at me then for a long moment, as if trying to think whether there was a problem but without much luck, and the moment stretched.

"Is there something else I can help you with?" I asked.

The moment stretched further.

"Deputy Johnson?"

He frowned at me again, as if just coming back from a trip his mind had taken. "The chaplain said you were in counter-intelligence?"

"Did he," I replied, putting a lid on my irritation.

"You do conduct investigations, right?"

"I have."

"Criminal investigations?"

Where was this going, I wondered. "What's this all about?"

He sat forward and said, "I need help, Mr. Virginiak. I'm in trouble."

"Really."

He nodded. "This past April the old sheriff of Juachita, Joshua Clarke, was killed in a fire." He shrugged. "Actually, he was retired. He'd been retired for almost ten years." Johnson smiled. "He was just a nice old man. Lived alone. Had a cabin up in the mountains that was pretty isolated. We used to go hunting and—" He stopped. "Well—officially, the case is closed. They called it an accident, but the fact is that Sheriff Aspin's investigation never went very far."

"Where should it have gone?" I asked.

He seemed hesitant. "I... wasn't involved with the original investigation," he told me, "but it's been on my mind. I got to know Sheriff Clarke pretty well before he died, and..." He frowned down at his hands. "Well, it's bothered me."

I waited while he showed me how deeply he was bothered, which seemed quite a bit.

Johnson looked back up at me. "Couple of months ago, I took a leave of absence, and I've been following some leads." From under his shirt he brought out a manila envelope from which he removed a photograph. "This picture," he told

me, "was found among Sheriff Clarke's belongings."

He handed it over. I was looking at a grainy eight by ten Xeroxed copy of a black and white photo of five men on horseback. Four of them wore army fatigues with Sam Browne belts and wide-brimmed hats, one wore civilian clothes and a ten-gallon Stetson.

I stared at the photo for a moment, not seeing it at first, but then I did and pointed to the grinning face of a very young man, farthest on the right. "That looks like Bill Kravet."

"It is," Johnson told me. He pointed at the other three soldiers. "Captain Robert Newbury, Lieutenant Elron Cafe, Corporal Willem Wunheld." He pointed to the man in the Stetson. "That's Sheriff Clarke."

I turned it over. On the back the names and ranks of the four soldiers had been printed, along with the words "Camp Arnold, N.M.—1944."

"Camp Arnold," Johnson explained, "was an old army post that's been closed since the Korean war. Apparently, Newbury, Cafe, Wunheld, and Kravet were all stationed there during World War II."

I looked at the picture again, then handed it back to him saying, "It looks like a newspaper photo."

"I think," he said slowly, "that there's some connection between these four men and the death of Sheriff Clarke."

I frowned at him. "Why would you think that?"

He put the picture away. "I came here because Bill Kravet's name was in the papers — about the fire?"

"All right," I said, a bit impatient with his evasiveness.

"What I want to know is whether Bill Kravet ever talked to you about any of these men or Sheriff Clarke."

"No."

"Did he ever talk to you, or maybe write to you, about something that he did back during World War II?"

"No."

He leaned forward. "Did he ever say anything at all about . . ."

I held up a hand. "Deputy Johnson . . ."

He smiled. "Call me Nick."

"Nick," I said. "The fact is, I haven't seen or spoken with Bill Kravet in nearly twenty years."

He blinked. "But I thought . . ." He frowned with confusion. "You said at the service that he was your friend."

"I know."

"I don't understand."

I didn't entirely understand myself either.

"It was a eulogy, Nick," I explained. "There were a lot of other people there who'd lost fathers, husbands, brothers, and friends in that fire." I shrugged. "I tried to give all of them a lift, and I had to fudge a little on my relationship with Bill Kravet to do it."

Johnson sat back, frowning sharply. "Did you know him at all?"

"Not well," I admitted. "After he retired, we — lost touch."

His face was a mask of genuine disappointment.

"Actually," I told him, "Bill Kravet was not a very nice man, and I didn't like him. He saved my life once, that's true, but that's just what soldiers do."

"But you came here?"

"A couple of months ago, Kravet gave my name as next of kin. He had no one else, so when he died, the chaplain called and asked me to speak at the service."

"Oh," he said in a faraway voice.

"I didn't really want to do it," I told him. "But the chaplain was persuasive, and I owed Kravet something."

"I see."

"I'm sorry I can't be any help to you."

He sat there then for another long while, saying nothing, watching the pool shine in the

sun, his thoughts gone I don't know where, but my impatience had vanished, so I just waited with him.

Feeling a bit ashamed.

For my hypocrisy that day; for my lack of interest in his problem.

I said finally, "Have you located the other men in the picture?"

"No," he replied, but with a touch of uncertainty.

"I don't understand why you think there's a connection between them and your dead sheriff, but the Department of Defense could be checked through your office. You could get their permanent residences and write them, or call."

He smiled a small smile and said, "Aspin would never allow that."

"Oh?"

He said nothing, giving the pool another look-over, then his eyes came back to me and he said, "I told you I was in trouble, Mr. Virginiak. I think there's some kind of coverup going on. I've thought so for some time, and I'm not sure how to proceed. I think Sheriff Clarke was murdered."

"I see," I said, seeing nothing at all actually and wondering for the umpteenth time where this was all going, and not wanting to go along.

"I think there's a conspiracy, and I think Sheriff Aspin is behind it, and if he knew I was talking to you, or anybody, I think I'd be killed, too."

"Really."

He nodded. "I think Clarke may have found out something about Aspin, and Aspin had him killed to keep him quiet."

"Uh-huh."

He smiled. "You think I'm paranoid."

I didn't commit myself.

"Well, I'm not," he assured me. "There's something fishy in this, and there's a lot at stake, too. Juachita is a growing town, Mr. Virginiak. Lots of new industry moving in. A nice place to live, but also a nice place for graft and corruption to take root." He shrugged. "The sheriff is a powerful man in Juachita County."

"I think Clarke's death has something to do with—I don't know—some scandal that Aspin wants to keep quiet. Something that might reflect back on him." He held the envelope up. "And it has something to do with these men, I'm sure of it."

"Why?"

"It was something Clarke told me once," he said in that same faraway voice.

And I waited, but he didn't tell me what Clarke had said, and I didn't bother to ask him because, for me, the conversa-

tion had grown pretty disjointed, not a little cockeyed, semi-farfetched, and rather bizarre, and I wanted it over.

I said, "Well, my advice is to contact the state police or the FBI."

"I've no evidence to give them, Mr. Virginiak."

"Well, I don't know what you want from me."

"Come to Juachita," he said.

I stared at him.

"I need help," he told me, "and there's no one there I can trust."

I kept my stare on him for a moment, finding it hard to treat his request seriously.

"Please," he began. "I don't know what to do."

"I can't do that."

"You could do some checking around on the outside, while I worked on the inside . . ."

I held up my hand. "No," I said.

He sat back. "But . . ."

"I work for the army, Nick."

"But . . ."

"No!" I told him, sharply enough to shut him up. "I'm on funeral leave that ends tonight at 2400 hours, and I'm due back in my office at Fort Lewis at 0700 hours tomorrow. Even if I thought it would do you any good for me to be there, I couldn't go."

"I'm sorry," I told him.

"Well," he said. "I guess that's it then."

"I'm sorry," I repeated.

Johnson looked down for a moment, then adjusted his sunglasses, looked back up at me, and stood. "I'm sorry I wasted your time, Mr. Virginiak."

So was I, I thought as I stood up too, holding out my hand for him to shake, about to say something innocuous and final, but then . . .

There were tears on his face—God help me.

"Nick . . ."

"Just forget it," he said, shaking my hand weakly. "It's none of your business."

Right.

"Look," I said, "I really can't go to Juachita."

"Forget it!" he said sharply. "I'll just . . ."

"And I *am* sorry, but . . ."

"I said forget it!"

"... I could do that DOD inquiry through my own office for you."

He shook his head, wiping his eyes—Jesus.

"It's a simple matter, really," I told him. "Give me those names again, and your number in Juachita."

He stared at me, as if considering turning me down, but then he smiled. "All right," he said. "And thank you. Thank you very much."

After copying down the names for me, he left, which didn't bother me a lot because the young man was a bit unnerving.

And which, because I'd forgotten about being hungry, put my nose back into Dostoyevsky, but that was a lost cause by then.

I kept thinking of Bill Kravet as the young man I'd seen in Johnson's picture and wondering how he became the Bill Kravet I had known.

Whether he'd been all along what he was when I knew him, whether the bad man he became was there to read in the DNA of his youth.

Too late now to wonder, though.

I went back to my room, packed, checked out, and took a cab to the airport.

I checked Bill's ashes through with my luggage, but they were on my mind all during the flight. Not that I came up with any ideas about what to do with them or why he'd given me the chore, but I did give it a lot of thought because I owed him that.

He had saved my life, and even if I could rationalize that as merely "what soldiers do," it nevertheless felt like a debt I had to pay, and I wanted the books cleared.

But what he'd expected me to do with his ashes I had no idea at all, and nothing occurred to me on the three hour flight home, the drive back to Fort Lewis, or the walk from the parking lot to my billet.

Where I finally decided what might work was to stop thinking about the problem directly.

So I parked the black shoebox on a shelf over my dresser and, for a while, anyway, just forgot about it.

I did not, however, forget my promise to Nick Johnson.

Next morning after breakfast I paid a visit to the Fort Lewis comm center, a labyrinthine building, bristling with electronics, where, in the third sub-level, the command computing center for the entire Sixth Army was housed. In a tiny, rather darkened office, away from all the busyness of the rows of clattering, humming, buzzing terminals in the main computing room, I found the center's resident wonk. He was hunched over a terminal, peering intently at a scrolling screen of numbers and characters that made no sense to me but had all his considerable attention.

"Hello, Kats," I said, approaching him from behind.

He jumped about a foot, whirled in his chair, surprised

and goggle-eyed. "Jeesus!" he exclaimed, putting a hand over his heart. "You scared the hell out of me."

I sat myself on the edge of his desk and watched him collect himself.

Katsumi Kombayashi, Specialist 4th Class.

A big-eared, slight-figured wisp of a young man, early-twentyish, who wore a perpetual look of suspicion on his rather homely face that his very thick-lensed glasses did nothing to improve.

"What're you up to?" I asked, nodding toward the terminal.

"Nothing," he said. "What do you want, Mr. V?"

I smiled at him, remembering that behind his squinty eyes was the kind of brain the army would have a hard time replacing after his enlistment was up. "I need a favor," I told him.

His suspicious look grew more so. "What kind of favor?"

I took out the list of names from my pocket and handed it over. "I need you to do a DOD locate on these three men," I said. "Last active service known is 1944."

"Nineteen forty-four?"
Where's the batch request?"

"There isn't one."

"If you haven't got a batch order, Mr. V, then I can't . . ."

"That's the favor part, Kats. This isn't actually official."

He blinked. "Oh."

"If I put the request through channels, I'd have to explain what I wanted it for, and this is just a favor I'm doing for someone."

"I see."

I smiled. "So?"

He looked back at the list in his hand. "Do you know Sergeant Littledove, over in Supply?"

"I know her," I said, recalling the new WAC heartbreaker on post whose bearing and manner everybody and his brother had been talking about since she arrived.

"I asked her out."

"Did you," I said, my estimation of him increasing suddenly.

He nodded. "And—she likes the outdoors."

"Does she."

"Figured I'd take her up to Rainier this weekend."

"Sounds good."

"Maybe camp out," he said. "I'm off until Monday afternoon."

I nodded, wondering what garden path I was being led up.

He smiled. "Can I borrow your RV?"

That one, I thought. "It's not an RV," I told him. "It's a truck."

"Whatever."

Dammit, I thought. "Nobody borrows my truck," I said.

"I know," he said, looking down at the list. "That's what they say."

Damn!

"Okay," I said, without grace.

"No kidding?"

"I said okay!"

"Great."

"Now, about those names ..."

"We're out of the loop," Kats said. "I won't be able to interface with St. Louis until Monday afternoon."

"Monday, then." I turned to leave.

"Oh, and, Mr. V?"

I looked back at him. "What?"

Kats smiled. "A full tank would be nice."

Which arrangement, of course, left me wheelless for a long rainy weekend that I spent working, for lack of anything else to do. I ended up completing the computerization of the last of our unit files, a job that had been months in the effort, and by Monday morning I was the talk of the office. Even Chavez, my CO, had been impressed.

And then, when Kats called at around two o'clock and told me my "RV" was back outside my billet, safe and sound, and that he'd done the DOD locate

for me, it all seemed worth it somehow.

"Thing is," Kats said, "you got an offer."

"Offer?"

"Oh for three, Mr. V, they're all deceased. Newbury, Cafe, and Wunheld."

"Oh," I said, not surprised given the ages they would have been.

"So," he added, "that it?"

"Right, Kats. Thanks."

"My pleasure," he told me, leery-voiced. "Believe me."

I was sure it had been.

After work, back at my billet, I called long distance information for the number of the Juachita County Sheriff's Department because the number Johnson had given me was on the piece of paper I'd given to Kats. I dialed it straight away, asking, when they answered, for Deputy Nick Johnson.

Who, I was told by a sharp-voiced, unhelpful woman, did not exist.

I confirmed that fact with both the FBI register of New Mexico law enforcement officers and the New Mexico State Police by way of giving the young man and his semicoherent story about coverups and conspiracies the benefit of the doubt.

Though it was a bit of a puzzle, the news of his nonexistent

ence didn't floor me; I'd only half believed in him in the first place.

He had been about as vague and strange as his story had been, and that he turned out not to be who he said he was came as no great shock.

Still, it was a puzzle.

And I spent the rest of that day, that night, and the next morning, turning what I remembered of his confused story over and over in my head.

With no result except that I acquired a frowning, distracted look on my face that I couldn't rid myself of.

I was still wearing that expression on Tuesday when I stopped off at the unit P.O. to check my box for the first time that week.

Where I found a registered letter notice.

Which I took to the counter, then signed for and received a manila envelope postmarked Dallas, Texas, the week before with a return address of Logan, Stern and Harmon Law Offices.

Harmon's name was at the bottom of the short note inside, along with another envelope, sealed, with my name printed on the front.

The cover letter from Harmon read:

The enclosed material was received from Mr.

William H. Kravet of Killeen, Texas, on June 5th of this year, with instructions that it remain sealed and that upon his death should be posted to you c/o the Department of the Army.

Your receipt of this material acquits our office of any further obligation.

Still in the post office, I tore the envelope open and found a postcard, unsigned, with a short message in Italian written on the back, a dozen pages of tightly printed prose in English...

And a cashier's check made out to me in the amount of one hundred thousand dollars.

If the check wasn't enough to knock me over, the first lines of the letter—because that's what it was—were.

"If you're reading this, I'm dead," Kravet's letter began. "Killed, one way or another—but murdered is the truth of it, and I want you to find out who."

Murdered, I thought numbly, my eyes straying to the check in my other hand until I finally put it away.

The postcard, the front of which pictured a street scene in Milan, had a La Mesa, New Mexico, postmark of April fif-

teenth on it; the message was only two lines:

Ricorda 21 aprile 1945.

Morte, assassino!

Right.

I put the postcard away then and focused on the letter.

Never thought I'd tell a soul this story, [Kravet had written] but things are happening I don't know the reason for, like this postcard, plus the fact that Clarke and Newbury just got killed, so I thought this up as a kind of insurance. If not for my life, then for revenge, and you're the insurer, you little faggot, and you better pay the claim.

I'll tell you the whole of it from start to finish, cause I don't know if I left anything out you could find out who done me, and the money is to help you, and you'll do it cause you owe me and you know it.

You always were a holier-than-thou little prick, so here's your chance to settle the score. You owe me, Virginiak. You owe me your life, and by God this is the bill and you better pay. Are you listening?

That was the end of the first page, and I was surprised to find how unnerved I was by it.

I found a bench to sit on.

*

This happened a long time ago [he wrote]. When I was just a kid. Just fifteen I was, back in '44, and I lied about my age and joined the army cause I wanted to kill Japs. Course, that was pretty dumb, but I was just a kid. If I'd had any brains at all, I would have joined the marines, cause they didn't do as much checking as the army, and I'd've gotten a chance to kill as many Japs as I wanted.

But I had to join the army because my pa had been in the army, and sure enough, just when I was due to ship out, they found out how old I really was and nearly kicked me straight out of the war then and there.

Thing is, my pa knew somebody so they fixed it so I could stay in, but only stateside duty until I was 17. By then, though, the damn war was over, so I missed my chance to kill Japs, though I did get my share of gooks in Korea and Vietnam, so it all worked out in the end—but that's beside the point.

There I was, in the army, in '44, and because I was big for my age, and didn't take crap from anybody, they made me an MP, and that's how I got sent to old Camp Arnold. A dunghole that isn't even there now. Down in New Mex near

the border, and it was, hands down, the worst duty I ever pulled. Stuck in the middle of nowhere, it was right where it belonged, no good for anything but what it was—a goddam POW camp.

A POW camp for greaseball dagoes captured in '43 in North Africa. More than three hundred of them crammed in there, along with a company of MP's, and as bad as we made it for them, it was about as bad for us.

But I can't complain. Like I said, I was big and pretty mean for my age, and before too long I got a sort of reputation in the camp as a real Bad Ass so I kind of liked that. I mean, those greaseballs would scatter fast when they saw me coming, and if they didn't, I'd give them a lesson they didn't forget, but that's beside the point.

The point is I liked it there well enough to stay because of the reputation I got, and it was because of that reputation that Lt. Cafe came to me when they decided on some pretty dirty work to be done, and why I did it, even though I wasn't in on the deal from the start.

It had begun to rain. The bench I was sitting on outside the P.O. was only partly covered so I was getting a bit wet, but I stayed where I was and

read the thing through. By the time I finished, it was storming.

And so was my head.

In a semidaze I walked back to my billet where I lay in my bunk in the dark, thinking it out.

My eyes never far from the black box above my dresser.

Trying to come to some decision, some plan, but it wasn't easy. In the end deciding only to see Chavez about it in the morning but to sleep on it for now because . . .

Hell—I didn't know *what* to do.

And then, predictably, I dreamt about the cave. A dark, deep, airless place in the earth where I died bitterly, woke up with a start, drifted back to sleep, and dreamed it again—half a dozen times until, just before dawn, I gave sleep up and just lay in the dark.

Thinking that I still didn't know what to do.

And then, with sunlight chasing the shadows away, I was just about to head for the latrine and a shower when the phone by my bed rang. It was Nick Johnson, and he said, "Thank God, I tracked you down."

I sat up, thinking fast if not very well. "Where are you?" I asked.

"Juachita," he replied. "I'm laying low because Aspin has an APB out on me." He laughed a bit hysterically. "They've reclassified Clarke's death as murder, and I'm *wanted* for it."

"I see," I said in a voice that was suddenly hard to find.

"I *told* you! I *knew* it! Aspin found out what I've been doing, and now he's after me."

"Calm down," I said.

I heard him take a few settling breaths.

"Okay?" I said. "Now, first thing, you tell me who you really are."

"What?"

"I've checked," I told him. "With the FBI and the state police, and there's no record of a deputy sheriff named Nick Johnson."

"Christ!" he exclaimed. "It's Aspin—he's wiped me out of the computer bank. You've got to *help* me . . ."

"Calm down!"

"Look," he said more reasonably. "I've only been with the sheriff's department six months. Maybe that's why they've got no record of me with the FBI."

"Maybe."

"But the state cops are probably in on it with Aspin. You've got to believe me, Mr. Virginiak."

I tried to think. "Where are you?"

"I've got a place to hide out," he replied, "but they're looking for me, and if they pick me up, I'll never even make it to jail."

"Okay, okay," I said, coming to a decision. "Now listen. I'm going to come down there."

"Thank God," he said.

"I'll be there tomorrow. Is there a way I can get in touch with you?"

He told me—and I knew then exactly what to do.

Which is not to say that I had anything like a plan of action because I didn't.

All I had was an obscure agenda driving me suddenly. A subtle but compelling agenda, a personal stake in what would eventually happen, and I could see no way to keep myself involved if I didn't go it alone.

Which is why I told no one what I was up to.

And why, after calling in a big debt from Chavez, I wangled a couple of days' charged leave without having to tell him anything. And then I was . . .

Putting myself on a plane next morning to Las Cruces, via Albuquerque.

Renting a Jeep there and heading it southwest toward the border.

Driving through the hot desert toward the Portrillo Mountains, which cut the horizon.

Arriving in their foothills, and the town of Juachita, New Mexico, at high noon.

If the middle of nowhere had a name, Juachita was it.

Small, dusty, on the edge of extinction, where Main Street was a dozen gray faded buildings, half of which were boarded up, the other half wishing they were, lined up along a cracked, weed-sprouting section of highway.

I'd driven through the tiny town so fast, I was a mile beyond it before I realized that that had been my destination and had to turn around and go back.

Juachita, New Mexico.

A growing town? Lots of industry moving in? A nice place to live?

In the middle was an adobe structure about the size and shape of a railroad boxcar that announced itself as the Juachita County Sheriff's Office on a sign someone had leaned against the wall outside. I parked in front, next to an old Plymouth with a Sheriff's Office logo on the side.

Where I sat for a while, thinking it out.

Juachita was a dump that was going nowhere, that anyone with half a brain escaped from—which made Nick John-

son, or whoever he was, a major-league liar.

And I wondered what else.

I'd been sitting there for about five minutes when the door to the sheriff's office opened and a scrawny old man, dressed in something like a uniform and munching a sandwich, poked his head out, squinted at me, and said, "You lost, mister?"

Which was just about right.

"Johnson," Sheriff Toby Aspin ruminated. "Don't recollect the name."

"He never worked for you here?" I asked. "As a deputy?"

Aspen smiled with self-deprecation. "There ain't but me and old Delores that's worked here the past ten years," he told me.

Old Delores—of the sharp tongue—an impossibly fat woman who "womanned" the counter and the radio at the front of the building had not looked up at me from her *Star* newspaper when I'd followed Aspin back to his office—a tiny cubicle that fronted a row of empty cells.

At the moment, we were sipping beer and eating his lunch—tuna salad sandwiches he'd offered to share with me.

"Yep," he said with a sigh. "I'm the Law here, Mr. Virgin-

iak." He chuckled. "Not that that's sayin' a whole lot."

I smiled back at him.

Aspin was a pleasant oldster whose false teeth tended to slip when he spoke and whose face was a mass of wrinkles. He looked about as sinister as Santa Claus.

"Fact is," he went on, "there just ain't no need for more than me, if you know what I mean. County only keeps me on 'cause the charter calls for it." He shrugged. "State cops do all the real work. Old Delores and me are just hangin' on till I retire."

He polished off the last of his sandwich, washed it down with a gulp of beer, then sat back. "So what's this all about, anyway?"

Good question:

I said, "Let me describe a man for you, and see if it rings a bell."

As I described Johnson, I could see recognition come into his eyes even before he started nodding.

"You know, I think I *do* know who you mean," he told me. "That's the feller from New York."

"New York?"

"Name of Scarfa, I recall."

"Scarfa?"

He frowned with the effort of remembrance. "This was back in March, or April, I think it was. Said he was a cop from

New York workin' on some old case." He nodded. "Wanted to see old Josh Clarke about it, too."

"Did he?"

"Yep," he said. "Leastways, I told him where he could find him. Never seen him again, so I s'pect he got what he wanted from Josh."

"Josh Clarke," I said. "He used to be sheriff here, didn't he?"

"Near on forty years," he told me. "He's dead, you know."

"Really."

"Cabin up on Saddle Back Ridge burned down a couple of months back. He was in it." He squinted at me. "What *is* all this, anyway?"

"Tell me," I said, "do the names Robert Newbury, Elron Cafe, Willem Wunheld, and Bill Kravet mean anything to you?"

Aspin stared in amazement at me.

"What is it?"

He laughed. "Well, it's just that it's so funny, you askin' about them guys and all, because *that's* the case."

"What case?"

"The case Scarfa was lookin' into," he replied patiently.

"Oh."

Aspin swallowed and sat forward. "Josh come in here sometime after I put Scarfa onto him and had me do an interstate

find and inquire on those fellers. It was about some old murder the New York cops was interested in or something. Took place a long time ago.

"We didn't have no file on it, 'cause Josh used to keep his files in his head if you know what I mean."

"And you did the interstate find?" I asked.

"Sure did. Got their names and addresses from the Department of Defense, and Josh had me get the local law in four states run 'em down and talk to 'em. Ran up phone bills the county council is still grumblin' about." He smiled. "But I was old Josh's deputy for twenty years before I got the big chair here, so I kinda got used to doin' what he wanted, you know?"

"I see."

He sat back again and nodded. "Yep," he recalled. "Old Josh really had his nose in this one, let me tell you. In here every day, seeing what came in. Not that what came back was much help. I don't know if these fellers were supposed to be suspects or witnesses, but none knew a damn thing about it . . ."

"Wait a minute," I said, feeling the breath suddenly squeezed out of me.

"What?"

"You mean," I said slowly, "that Cafe and Wunheld were both alive two months ago?"

He hmmmph'd. "Well, of course they was," he replied. "Newbury and Kravet, too. Got their Q and A's in the evidence file if you'd like to see them."

After getting my breath back on an even keel, I told him I would. Not that what he showed me was terribly enlightening:

"Newbury claimed no knowledge of the man Escarfalini," a Florida state trooper stated; *"Mr. Wunheld's condition precluded further interrogation,"* a deputy from the L.A. County sheriff's office had written; *"Elron Cafe's responses were incoherent and the interview was terminated,"* a Pittsburgh police sergeant had put down; and *"William Kravet's replies were obscene and negative to all inquiries regarding the murder,"* a Houston detective said.

Right, I thought numbly as I looked them over. What else *could* they say. What else could be said . . .

"You okay, young feller?" Aspin asked. "You looked kinda spooked."

"I'm fine," I told him, trying to get some of the shock out of my face. "You haven't seen this Scarfa fellow since then?"

"Nope," he told me. "But when old Josh turned up dead,

I did give him a call back in New York, and it turns out he weren't no cop no more after all."

"Oh?"

"Had him a badge—I seen it, and it was legit—but when I called New York, they told me he'd been off the force about six months. And then," he went on, "a week after that, his wife called me."

"Scarfa's wife?"

"I'm tellin' it straight," he assured me. "She called and wanted to know where the hell he was and said she wanted some money he owed her." He laughed. "She was a right sore woman, let me tell you. Told me to call her if I run into him again."

"Really."

"God's truth," he told me. "This a mystery or ain't it?"

"You have her number?"

He rummaged around in his desk for a minute and came up with it, and I asked if I could use his phone.

"Sure you can," he said, turning the instrument around to face me. "Help yourself."

"If it's long distance," Old Delores cackled from twenty feet away, "reverse the charges, if you don't mind."

I called Fort Lewis first, where I got on to Kats at the comm center and in return for

another weekend in my RV—*truck!*—got him to do some more checking for me.

And then I tried the number Aspin gave me—Scarfa's wife—but there was no answer.

Which, after I hung up, left me in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do.

At least until night.

I spent part of the rest of that afternoon walking around Juachita, seeing the sights, but after a minute or so of that, I started seeing all the sights for a second time, so I got in my rental and went looking for a place to stay.

I found one five miles north of Juachita edging the desert side of the road, a tiny, no-name motel of six rickety cabins with a combination office and eat-at-your-own-risk diner. I checked in, to the mild surprise and wary suspicion of the grumpy old woman who managed the place, but she took my money and showed me to my room, a stuffy, phoneless cell with a bare-mattressed bed and a curtainless shower that had roaches the size of mice scurrying over its floor. When I asked the old woman for clean sheets, you'd have thought I'd asked for the moon.

It was not, especially at my age, my kind of place, but then I wasn't planning to put down any roots.

After getting my sheets—which were semiclean and for which the old goat asked a ten dollar deposit—I got back in my rental and drove the twenty or so miles up to La Mesa, where I spent the next few hours in the library behind its only functional reference computer. Though it took a while, I managed to access the right databank, the Juachita County *Trumpeter*, which had ceased publication in 1960. After another long while I ran across the old photograph Johnson, or rather Scarfa, had shown me. It was above the April 22nd, 1945, story of the mass escape of twenty-three men from the Fort Arnold POW camp:

Military authorities at Camp Arnold announced last night the escape of 23 internees of the prisoner of war facility located there.

The men, all officers of the Italian National Army captured in the late African Campaign by United States forces, were first missed during a late-night roll-call, according to Captain Robert W. Newbury, commandant of the POW camp, which presently houses more than 300 internees.

Details of the escape were not known; however,

Capt. Newbury did say that the only possible route the escapees could have taken was through the desert south of Camp Arnold, and that in all likelihood, they would try to get across the border into Mexico.

Four search teams were assembled this morning under the command of Capt. Newbury, Lt. Elron Cafe, executive officer of the POW camp, Sgt. Wm. H. Kravet, and Juachita County Deputy Sheriff Joshua Clarke, whose reputation as a tracker is legend in the area.

The men left Arnold on horseback in an effort to locate and apprehend the escapees. Capt. Newbury predicts the recapture of the fugitives in quick time.

The story was still big news two weeks later, but on May eighth the end of the war in Europe pushed the escape story out of sight, and then, on May twentieth, the search was called off.

“‘As far as I’m concerned,’” Clarke was quoted as saying, “‘the search is off. The men are dead in the desert or gone to Mexico. Either way, it’s not our jurisdiction any more.’”

A picture of Clarke accompanied this article, better than the earlier one, showing a young man with hard eyes staring out from under a broad-brimmed hat.

He didn't look like the type who'd miss much.

I scanned the newspaper files for the next few months, but that was the last mention of Camp Arnold until September, when a short piece on the repatriation of the remaining internees appeared.

Of the twenty-three men who'd escaped no further word was printed.

A little after five, I left the library, grabbed a meal there in La Mesa—chili with rice—then belched my way back to the no-name motel.

I took a cold shower—the only sort available—along with everything else that lived in the bath, put on clean clothes, and moved myself to the diner.

Got a can of semicool beer from the grumpy old woman, who charged me three dollars for it and after a lot of exasperated eye-rolling gave me five dollars in silver as change for the two calls I made from the phone booth just outside the diner. The first one was to Kats, who said when he answered, "Hey, Mr. V, you got the real deal here."

"Have I?"

"This is some weird stuff."

"What do you mean?"

"All three, Mr. V," he told me. "Died in accidents, all in the past couple of months. You want details?"

"Roughly."

"Okay," he said. "Robert Newbury, retired as a brigadier general in 1973, was electrocuted in his garage in Tampa, Florida, while changing the battery in his car. May fifteenth."

"Okay."

"Willem Wunheld," he went on with some excitement, "fell to his death from the tenth floor window of his nursing home in Pasadena three weeks later, June sixth."

"Elron Cafe—listen to *this*—Cafe was crushed to death and dismembered by a trash truck that had emptied the dumpster he'd been sleeping in into its grinder. Jesus!"

"Right," I said.

"Just three weeks ago—June thirtieth. How about that?"

"That's fine, Kats—thanks."

"Weird, huh?"

"Weird."

"So?" he said, with some expectation. "What's it all about? We got a serial killer here, right? Some kind of psycho, stalking old men, right?"

"No..."

"I've got hard copies of the local news stories. You want me to fax them to you?"

"No," I said. "I want you to shred those stories and forget about it."

He went quiet on me.

"Did you hear me, Specialist Kombayashi?"

He sighed with disappointment. "Yeah," he replied. "I heard you."

I sipped some of my beer. "You're a good soldier, Kats."

He snorted. "For another six months and six days, and then you can kiss my . . ."

"Later," I told him, hanging up.

Right.

My mouth felt dry just then, so I drank my beer outside before making the second call.

The night sky was clouded up, heavy with the promise of rain.

Accidents, I thought, wondering if any one of them seemed suspicious. Taken together, the three of them—or four, including Kravet; make that five, with Clarke—*that's* suspicious, but taken singly?

Probably not, I decided. Hopefully not.

I finished my beer, then put myself back in the phone booth, where I dialed the number Aspin had given me. After feeding a number of quarters into the

slot, I listened to several rings until finally a woman said, "Hello?"

"Ellen Scarfa?" I asked.

"Whittier," she corrected me wearily. "Ellen Whittier—who's this?"

"You don't know me, Mrs. Whittier. My name's Virginiak. I'm calling from Juachita, New Mexico, and I'd like to ask you some questions about your husband."

"Ex-husband," she said reflexively. "Is Nicky all right?"

"As far as I know."

"Uh-huh. Well . . . look, I just came in the door, Mr. Whoever-you-are, and I really don't feel like talking about Nicky right now, you know?"

"I was under the impression that you were looking for him."

"I was. Now I'm not."

"Oh?"

She sighed. "Look, Mr. . . . ?"

"Virginiak."

"Virginiak. Fine. Um—does Nick owe you money or something? Because if he does, I really don't know where he is."

"No," I told her. "Nothing like that. I was just wondering if you'd been in touch with him."

"He called me," she admitted.

"Yesterday, in fact."

"Really."

"And I don't know where he was calling from, and I don't care."

"I see," I said. "Did he say anything to you about—what he was up to?"

She was quiet for a moment, then said, "Are you a cop? Is Nicky in trouble?"

"No," I told her. "I'm not a cop. I'm a soldier, and Nicky asked me to do him a favor, which I did, but now I think he may be in trouble, yes."

"What kind of trouble?"

"I'm not sure, but it seems serious."

"Oh God," she said tiredly. "I had a feeling."

"What?"

"Oh hell—let me get a cigarette, okay?"

I waited, spending a bit more change in the process, and when she came back, she sounded less weary and now a bit concerned.

"Look," she told me. "Nicky and I have been divorced almost two years now, and I really don't know what he's up to, you know? But when he called yesterday to talk with the boys, he sounded pretty worked up."

"Worked up?"

"Yeah. Like he might be about to *do* something—I don't know what."

"I see."

"I mean. Well, *you* know he's—pretty sick."

"He is?"

She thought that over. "I thought you were a friend of his."

"Not exactly," I admitted. "We met last week in Texas, then we spoke on the phone yesterday, so I don't know him very well. But I'd like to help him if I can."

She said nothing.

I said, "The more you can tell me, the better able I might be to help him. He sounded pretty desperate when I spoke with him yesterday."

She hesitated a bit more, then said, "I don't feel right talking about him like this."

I couldn't help that, so I said nothing and waited.

Finally, she said, "They never shoulda let him out of the hospital."

"What hospital?"

"The hospital he was in after he had his breakdown."

"Oh."

"Nicky's father," she said with reluctance. "He died a year ago, and Nicky, he went right off the deep end about it."

"I see."

"They'd never gotten along, him and his father—all the time we were married, anyway—but when the old man died, I think Nicky felt, you know, pretty guilty and all, and he tried to... you know... kill himself?"

"Oh."

"He actually shot himself, put a bullet in his head, but he didn't die." She groaned.

"Christ, they never should have let him out."

"How long was he in the hospital?"

"About six months," she told me. "He got out this past January, and he was like, really different. I hardly knew him."

"How was he different?"

"It's hard to describe," she said. "I mean, he wasn't suicidal any more, which was good, but I don't know, he was like all of a sudden obsessed with his roots or something. Like all of a sudden he really became his father's son, finally. I mean, the old man was a real Old Country guy. Talked with a heavy accent and all, dressed funny, and Nicky kind of hated it before. The way his father was, I mean, but then, just like that, after the old man is dead, Nicky starts acting like *he* just got off the boat, too. Takes a class in Italian, and the next thing I knew, he quit the force and took off to Italy."

"Italy?"

"Uh-huh. Like where his folks came over from. Milan, I think."

"I see."

"I didn't even know he was back until I found out from one of his friends here that he was down in New Mexico, pretending to be a cop on some phony investigation. I called down there 'cause if he was

working I could use the child support, you know? But the sheriff—I forget his name—didn't know anything about where he was or what he was up to, and I didn't hear another word until he called me himself yesterday."

"Did he say anything at all yesterday about what he's doing?"

"Only something about how the case he was working on was closed. I told him he wasn't working on any damned case, and that he's in a lot of trouble going around flashing his badge when he isn't a cop any more."

"I see."

She heaved a big sigh. "He only wanted to talk to Michael and Paul, and I listened in, and it sounded like... I don't know..." Her voice had suddenly become thick. "It sounded like he was telling them goodbye."

That gave me quite a lot to think over, which I did back in my room.

Thinking and hoping that what I was doing wasn't stupidly reckless.

I was dealing here with motives and passions that were unpredictably dangerous and irrational, and although I still felt as though I had a personal

stake in the outcome, it wasn't something I wanted to die for.

So, what was my agenda?

All I knew for certain was that I was doing what I had to do—which meant being here, and alone, and that something like responsibility was at the bottom of it.

A vague sense of obligation, though to whom or what, I wasn't sure.

I wasn't sure of anything.

So—stupidly reckless?

Reckless, maybe, I decided in the end, but stupidly so?

I hoped not.

A little before nine it started to rain, finally. For a while, I watched it streak my dirty window—having second second thoughts—until finally, at nine on the nose, sick of my hesitancy, I got out of there.

Put myself in my Jeep, and then, following Scarfa's instructions, drove the ten miles or so south of Juachita.

Along a lightning-flashed highway, to the remains of old Camp Arnold.

It was set just off the highway, fronting some dark hills. I turned in and for a while wove over the cracked camp roads, avoiding the larger clumps of vegetation that had overgrown everything, straining in the rain to see ...

I didn't know what. History, maybe? All I did see were the skeletal remains of buildings, a few telephone poles, a barbed wire fence minus its wire, and a couple of tipped-over guard towers—not much to mark what had happened here. Not much, but then what should?

At nine thirty, a half hour early, I found the remains of the post canteen, where I parked, per instructions, settled back, and waited.

It turned ten, then ten thirty.

He was late, but I had nowhere to go.

Outside, through my rain-streaming windshield, I watched racing black clouds against the blacker night and light shocks that lit the barren landscape.

It turned eleven, then eleven thirty, and then twelve ...

And finally, at a quarter after, he came. A large white van pulled in from the highway, turned off its lights, and drove down the camp road toward me, stopping about a hundred feet from where I was parked.

I couldn't see very well through the stormy dark space between us, but after a moment I thought I saw the driver's side door popping open, but nothing else. I waited another minute or so, but no one came.

Impatient finally, I got out of the Jeep and looked, but I couldn't make him out anywhere. Worrying that he might have fallen or something, I moved toward the van.

He wasn't lying on the ground between us, however, and when I got to the van and looked in at the front seat, I didn't see him there, either. I moved over and opened the side door . . .

And then, for a while, I didn't know anything.

I came to, more or less, with the back of my head thumping from the blow it had taken. I was flat on my face in the back of the van, and we were driving somewhere—uphill over very rough ground—but I stayed still.

My head felt like a water balloon, and if I sat up I was going to be sick, so I stayed put and took a few deep breaths . . .

And the lights must have gone out again, at least for a minute or so, because the next thing I knew, we were stopped.

And then I was being dragged out, feet first, and stood against the van with a shotgun pointed at my chin.

It was dead dark and still raining, and my head was swimming, and the man in front of me was just a blur.

"That way!" he told me, nodding toward a pile of black shadow to my right. He gave my shoulder a sharp nudge with the gun.

I walked, slid, stumbled, climbed, and generally fell my way over a rocky path, up into a space between some larger rocks, where I stopped until he pushed me with the gun again and, banging my poor head on something, I flopped forward into utter darkness.

Which is when the fun really began.

Because the tunnel I found myself in was for midgets in hard hats, and it went on forever. I walked stooped over with one arm folded over my head and another outflung in front of me, but stumble and bang my head I did anyway, over and over, for I don't know how long until there was light, and we were there.

Inside a cavern twenty feet high, forty or more in diameter, lit with a wavery yellow light.

I stopped and stared until he gave me another shove, knocking me to the ground.

Where bones littered the rocky floor.

Human bones, jittering in the light of candles that he'd placed inside the cavern, they were everywhere around me.

Skulls, ribcages, arms, legs, hands, and feet.

"Turn around," Scarfa said.

Some lying singly, some connected, a few complete skeletons with bits of rags attached, and leg-chains . . .

"Mr. Virginiak?"

I turned, but taking my time, my eyes arrested by all they saw. The *déjà vu* sense was strong.

I was living inside my own nightmare.

"Mr. Virginiak?"

I looked at him as I gingerly touched the lump on the back of my head.

"I'm sorry," Scarfa told me. "About hitting you like that."

He was standing near the cavern entrance, and he didn't look very well.

"I saw you go into the sheriff's office today," he said. "I thought maybe it was a trap."

Soaked from head to foot, he was dressed in dirty jeans and a stained T-shirt; his body trembled as if from a fever, and his eyes were bloodshot, staring things that hadn't slept in a very long while.

He squinted at me. "What did you tell Aspin?"

"Nothing," I assured him.

"Nothing?"

"This is a private matter, isn't it?"

He frowned, looked vaguely puzzled for a moment, then

shook his head. Behind him, in flickering shadow, were suitcases and a pile of cardboard boxes; to his left, a sleeping bag, clothing, and empty food tins; to his right, a neat stack of large, shiny cans.

"Well, I *am* sorry about hitting you," he said.

I did not forgive him.

He frowned again, then nodded his head at the rock-walled room around us. "This," he told me softly, "is hallowed ground."

Just to my right, the skull of a man looked at me with its empty eye sockets.

Right.

My back was killing me, so I put a hand up, then got slowly to my feet, my eyes locked on the shotgun Scarfa was holding. I moved myself carefully around the bones, over to a large rock in the middle of the cavern where I sat down.

"A place of respect," Scarfa added in a breathless whisper.

Behind him I could now see a white-painted message written on the rock wall.

In Nome di Dio

"I know where I am," I told him. "Why did you bring *me* here?"

He turned his head slightly, keeping one squinting eye on me. "Kravet did tell you about it, didn't he?"

"He sent me a letter," I admitted. "It came just the other day."

Scarfa's brow furrowed sharply. "And he told you? What he did? What *they* did?"

I nodded.

He kept the questioning squint on me a moment more, then shook his head. "He told me that he'd written a letter, but . . ."

"Why did you want me here, Nick?"

He looked suddenly confused, as if he'd forgotten.

"You went to a lot of trouble to get me here," I reminded him. "That story about Sheriff Aspin, the big conspiracy, about being wanted for Clarke's murder?"

But he only blinked at me.

It was as if he were programmed to respond only to certain conversational gambits and not others.

So I tried another. "I spoke with Ellen tonight."

He cocked his head slightly.

"We had a long talk about you," I said. "I know you took your father's death very hard."

"Ellen," he whispered.

"She said you were in a hospital."

He frowned, as if remembering.

"You remember being in the hospital, Nick?"

His frown sharpened. "Yes," he told me. "I remember."

I nodded and waited but his eyes seemed to glaze, and for a moment I despaired of ever making sense of it all. He suddenly stood away from the wall, though, and moved himself over to the pile of cartons, where he began to rummage around. "My grandfather's letters," he murmured as he dug into a box, "to my grandmother . . . from the war." Finally he came up with a shoebox which he stared quietly at for a long moment before looking over at me and saying, "I found them . . . after . . ." His face twisted with sudden, powerful emotion. "I found them in my father's things."

"Take it easy, Nick."

He shook his head, tears suddenly streaming down his face. For several minutes while Scarfa just cried—painful, silent sobbing—I looked my situation over once more.

Seeing just what I'd seen before.

There was only one exit from the half-collapsed cavern, and he was a lot closer to it than I. Although he was careless with the gun in his hands, he was far enough out of reach that if I made a move he could bring it to bear on me easily enough. Though I didn't really think he meant me harm, Scarfa wasn't

in a very stable frame of mind, and I wasn't ready to join the bone chorus just yet.

So I stayed where I was and waited while Scarfa cried for his father.

When he'd finished, he seemed a lot more relaxed and in control. "I was a terrible son," he told me in a hoarse whisper.

"Most of us are," I said.

He sat down on a pile of rocks. "I was ashamed of my father. The way he talked. The way he dressed. Even his name. Enzo," he whispered.

"I never really talked to him." He opened the box and began fingering the envelopes inside. "I never even knew if my own grandparents were alive or dead until after I found these. Isn't that horrible?"

I said nothing.

"I mean, I never even cared enough about him to know if his own mother and father—my own *grandparents*—were alive or dead."

He looked closely at me, waiting to see some kind of judgment in my face, but there was nothing there for him to see, and he looked back down at the letters.

"You were telling me why you went to Milan."

He said nothing for a moment, then gave me a long sad

look, and said, "Do you understand Italian?"

"No."

He took the top envelope from the box and removed several pages of yellowed, wrinkled paper.

"This is dated March 9, 1945. 'My Dearest Maria.'" He paused to look at me. "That's my grandmother."

I nodded.

"*'It has been nearly a year since I last heard from you,'*" he read, "*and I pray each night that you and Enzo are well. The time passes so slowly, and not knowing how things are with you is an eternity of torture. . . .*"

Scarfa turned the page over. "He puts in some more stuff about his own mother, and some other people—here." He squinted at the page and read:

"*'This camp is the worst I have been sent to, and its commandant is a cruel man. I have been sick. The food we are being fed is not fit for animals. The water is foul, and when someone complains, we are punished. It is a lot like when I was posted in Algeria, remember, my love?*"

"*'Yes, love, things are bad here, but we survive. That's what is important. We survive. And I will survive. I will return, my love, and all will be as it was.*"

"I hope that you receive this letter. I know other letters do not get by the commandant, but the Red Cross man will be here tomorrow, and I will put this letter with him. I hope he will send it along."

"It's signed 'With great love and affection, Nico.'" Scarfa refolded the letter and put it back in its envelope. "My grandfather—Colonel Nicolo Escarfalini."

"Ellen said you went to Milan," I said.

"Yes," he told me. "But I had no living relatives there. No one left, but then..." He frowned. "I was asking around, you know? Just trying to see if there was anyone who remembered. My grandfather's regiment was the 9th Armored. Most of the men came from Milan. The whole regiment surrendered in Tunis in March, 1943. They were interned in the United States until 1945. I talked with some of the men who were here at Camp Arnold."

I nodded.

"My grandfather never came back," he told me in a hoarse whisper. "None of the officers came back."

I was trying hard not to look at the skull by my feet.

"It was... such a strange thing," Scarfa was saying. "Some of the men I spoke with

said that my grandfather and the other officers just disappeared one night." He frowned. "I mean, if it had been an escape the way they said it was, where did they all go?"

"I know."

"So I came here."

"You looked up Josh Clarke," I said.

He went to lean against the wall near the cavern exit. "I read the articles about the escape," he told me. "Read about the great Josh Clarke, who was supposed to be this legendary desert tracker." He sneered. "The son of a bitch."

"He told you what happened?"

"Yeah," Scarfa said slowly. "Eventually. He took some persuading."

"And he helped you track the others down?"

He snorted. "He thought he could get away by ratting them out." He smiled. "He was anxious to please, you know?" He nodded around the cavern. "He showed me this place, and we dug out the shaft. It was the hardest work I've ever done in my life."

"But you killed him anyway," I said.

"Damn right I killed him. You think I'd let him live?"

I supposed not.

He laughed shortly. "No way that son of a bitch was going to

live. No way. But Clarke wasn't here when it happened, so I don't know . . . Did Kravet say *why* they did it?"

"Clarke didn't tell you?"

He shook his head. "He was just paid some money to lead the posse in circles. All he knew was *what* happened, not *why*." Scarfa came away from the wall toward me. "Did Kravet say *why* they killed these men?"

I hesitated. "Yes, he did."

"Why?" he asked. "I need to *know*!"

"Why didn't you ask the others?" I said. "Newbury, or Cafe, or Wunheld?"

His look became haunted. "I don't know," he told me. "It didn't seem important before."

"Only killing was important then, right?"

"Tell me!" he shouted.

I looked at him a moment, then sighed and said, "Cafe was hiring out POW's to work in a copper mine near here, but he wasn't paying them. Newbury was in on it. They made themselves quite a bit of money.

"Just before the war ended, Cafe and Newbury started to worry about what the Italian officers in the camp might have to say when they were released. They killed them to keep them from talking."

Scarfa stared. "You mean it was just about money?"

It was and it wasn't, but I didn't argue about it. I said, "From what Kravet wrote, I guess Cafe was pretty unbalanced."

Scarfa stared a bit more. "Unbelievable."

"I know."

He backed up again to the cavern wall and sagged against it. "What else did Kravet write?"

"What's the point?" I said. "They killed them all . . ."

"Tell me!"

"All right!" I snapped back.

I didn't know if this was going to do either of us any good, but I dug the letter out of my pocket, moved around to catch the light better, and skipped the preamble.

"*Cafe was going to pay me \$1000,*" I began, "*which was a lot of money back then, and all I had to do was be on a little burial detail. That's what he called it, but it was going to be more than that, and I knew it cause I knew Cafe.*"

I glanced up at Scarfa. He nodded brusquely for me to go on, so I did.

"*A real psycho, this Cafe was. Wore a long machete at his side, and although I never seen him use it before that night, the rumor was he'd offed a couple of dago heads with it. I also heard that in 1942 or thereabouts he'd been captured in North Africa*

himself by the Italian National Army, and they'd treated him pretty rough. That would explain why he turned psycho. I mean, what I did was bad, and so was what the others did, but what Cafe did was crazy bad – but that's beside the point.

“What Cafe wanted and what we did was this –”

I turned a page and felt Scarfa's eyes burning into me.

One night [I continued], and I remember it was raining like hell, too, we got all the dago officers together, about two dozen of them. This was me, Cafe, Newbury, and Wunheld. We got them all out of their barracks, and we told them they had to be deloused, and their barracks fumigated because the IG was coming in the morning.

This was a lie, but it was SOP at Camp Arnold that we generally cleaned up the camp and the POW's just before a Red Cross or IG inspection, so the wops didn't think it was too unusual except that it was night, and also that we'd set up the delousing station outside the camp.

On the other hand, it didn't matter a damn what they thought because we had guns and they didn't. On top of which, every last one of them was sick from one thing or an-

other on account of we didn't feed them nothing but beans and rice, and they were so weak you could knock them over with a feather.

So they didn't squawk too much when we put them in leg irons, which was SOP for the transport of POW officers, and then got them into a truck and took them way up into the hills north of the copper mine to this old abandoned shaft that Cafe knew about.

Naturally, once we got them there, the wops started yacking up a storm about it, especially Escarfalini, but again, what could they do? We told them to shut up and behave and they more or less did. So we got them into line and herded them all into the cave, where it was a real riot because the tunnel is so low and narrow and they all kept cracking their heads and falling all over each other and squawking like crazy. But we shoved them along, and finally it came out into this big cavern that was about a hundred feet in diameter and twenty feet high.

Now, there wasn't no delousing gear around, naturally, so as soon as we got them all in they really knew that something was up, and Escarfalini was shouting mad at Newbury, but I popped him on the head with my rifle butt, and then

Cafe fired some shots from his forty-five into the air and that shut them all up pretty much, and then Cafe told them to get down on the ground, which they did, and then he started talking to them, (in wop because he learned to speak it from the time he was a POW himself), and I don't know what he said, but it must have been close to the truth of what was going to happen because they all started getting real excited.

You see, the cavern was dead-ended—no way out but the way we came—and Cafe had already set some dynamite beforehand and run the lines back out through the tunnel to where we could set it off from outside and bring the whole mountain down on top of them.

That had been the plan he told me, but like I said, Cafe was psycho, and he was probably trying to revenge himself for what they did to him in North Africa by telling them what he was going to do. Newbury, meanwhile, who was a coward as well as being a first-class puke, was backing up to leave and he kept telling Cafe to quit it and bug out, but Cafe kept it up and Wunheld and me stood with him, and the more he talked the more worked up the wops got, and after a while there wasn't any holding them.

A few got up and tried to get around us to the shaft, but we shot them down easy cause they couldn't do any more than shuffle along in those leg irons, and Cafe cut down a couple of others with his machete, and when another one started toward the exit where Newbury was standing—who hadn't shot anybody to that point—Cafe told him to shoot the wop or be shot himself, so Newbury fired his weapon and brought the man down.

And then the rest of the wops just sat there on the floor, huddled in this big pile, scared as hell, whimpering and praying, and Cafe had gone wild, shouting at them, walking around them, waving that bloody machete of his in one hand and his forty-five in the other, and Newbury was yelling at Cafe, telling him it was time to go, but Cafe wouldn't listen, he just kept circling the pile of wops on the floor, every now and then swiping the machete down on this one or that one, shooting dead any who tried to get away, and you could feel the hate in the man.

And then after a while I guess he got tired or just finished saying what he had to say because finally he backed off, and gave me a look that said, "Do it," and I knew what he meant and I did it.

I emptied my Thompson into the pile and killed a dozen or so, reloaded, then emptied another twenty-round clip into them, and that was that. I don't know if they were all dead then or what, but none of them moved, and if any of them were still groaning when we finally bugged out, I wouldn't know cause I was deaf from all the racket the Thompson made but I killed most of them, I know.

We got up and out of that shaft, and Newbury set the dynamite off by touching the wires to the truck battery and although we didn't see much, we heard the explosion deep in the mountain, and Cafe went in to check, then came back and said whole shaft had closed, and then we just left.

When we got back, Newbury sounded the alarm and said the dago officers had escaped, and this deputy sheriff from Juachita whose name was Clarke headed up a posse to track them down, but Cafe had bought Clarke, too, so he just led the posse in circles and after a couple of weeks the whole thing settled down.

There was a bit more at the end that I skipped because it didn't matter. I refolded the letter and put it away, saying, "That's it."

Scarfa stood with his eyes closed for a moment; his face had a certain serenity to it now, as if knowing the logic in the terror that had unfolded here had eased one part of his troubled mind.

But only one part.

I said, "Why did you want me here, Nick?"

He opened his eyes and stared at me, then sighed and said, "Those other men, dying . . ." He shook his head. "That was an accident."

He meant the hospital fire he'd set.

"I was careless with the gasoline," he explained, with awful remembrance on his face. "Kravet jumped up . . . ran around . . . lit up the whole ward before I could . . ." He stopped. "It really *was* an accident."

"They're just as dead."

"I know," he replied guiltily. "I know that, but I *had* to do Kravet. He . . . they couldn't just get away with it. I couldn't let that happen. It needed justice. Justice had to be done, and there was no one else to do it. It needed for each of them to feel the horror of it. To feel the judgment, to see it coming . . ."

"Newbury, Cafe, and Wunheld?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"You killed them all?"

"Yes."

"And Clarke."

He looked down and nodded.

"And," I added, "fourteen old, sick, innocent men you don't even know the names of."

"Yes," he said, "I killed them."

"So," I said, trying but failing to keep the disgust I felt from getting into my voice, "you got me here, for what? To listen to your story? To *sympathize* with your feelings of guilt because you never talked with your father? To understand how you've compensated for your failure as a son by going on this rampage?"

"No!" he shouted. "I don't need anyone's sympathy or understanding. I went to the memorial service at Fort Hood because I felt bad about those men. And I heard you speak. And I thought..."

"What?"

"I thought that's what I needed here."

"What do you mean?"

"You," he said. "To say something. Like you did at Fort Hood."

I stared at him.

He waved the shotgun around the rocky floor. "These men need speaking over," he said. "They need..."

"I don't know these—men, Nick."

"The bond," he said. "With all soldiers who have battled together—that's what you said!"

"No," I told him with force enough to startle him. "You want a eulogy, Nick, but that's just a remembrance—and that's just for the living. These men—" I looked at the bones on the floor. "These men have already been remembered. And too well."

"But you said you felt a bond..."

"Soldiers are just men, and men are only soldiers for part of their lives. I feel a bond with some men who have soldiered and not with others. It depends on the man."

"But these men..."

"Are strangers to me."

"But you said..."

"I know what I *said*," I told him. "I just told you the truth."

"You mean—you have nothing to say?" he asked in disbelief.

"You've already said it, Nick."

Scarfa stared at me then long and hard because I'd disappointed him in the production of his little drama, but that was just too bad.

"What happens now?" I asked him.

He looked away and said nothing.

"Nick?"

He stayed quiet.

So I shut up, too, and waited. I wasn't going to rush this because I didn't know which way

he'd jump. Finally he looked back at me, and the finish was written in his haunted face.

He jerked his head toward the exit. "Get moving," he said.

I stood up but stayed put.

"I said get out!"

I hesitated another second or so, then moved toward the exit, but I stopped when I got there.

"Come with me," I told him.

He shook his head.

"Nick..."

"No!" he shouted. Then he sighed wearily and shook his head again. "No," he said, now quietly. "It's over."

I waited.

He smiled and nodded toward the stack of shiny cans against the wall to his right.

Cans with a skull-and-crossbones label on each just below the words BLACK POWDER.

"Get out now," he said hoarsely.

I wanted to, but for another second or so I hesitated.

Because life—anyone's life—is an important thing, and for that second or so, a life was in the balance. But the scales were tipped hard in the wrong direction just then.

Which left nothing else to say.

So—I just got out.

About as fast as when I went in, even though it was uphill and a hard climb. I'd just cleared the mine shaft entrance

and come scrabbling out into the rain and wind when the earth jumped a little and some thunder issued from deep under the hill behind me.

And then it *was* over.

For a while—a good long while—I just sat in Scarfa's van thinking things through.

The rest of that night, in fact, I sat there.

Watched the storm rage on, then finally die with the first reddening of the morning sky.

Sitting and thinking and deciding.

I was home by noon that same day, having nothing to keep me in Juachita; nothing more to do, no one to speak with.

I just went home, and once there, I crashed hard in my own bunk and slept dreamlessly, late into the following day.

Getting up, in fact, too late for breakfast, but I was in the office before Chavez arrived.

Who only "hmmph'd" at me as he walked past my desk.

Someday, I thought, I might tell him about it, but not then, and not soon, I decided—and no one else, ever.

For a lot of reasons, which to my mind outweighed any good that might come from troubling the survivors—and there would be many—of the men

who'd died in that cave so many years ago, of the men who killed them, of the men who'd died in the fire, and Nick's ex-wife and sons.

The truth, I'd decided, was far more troubling, and Nick's way was better for everyone, perhaps even himself.

And then there was the army, which had been my personal stake in things. The army is my home, where I live, and somewhere along the line I've grown pretty protective of its image. If the truth of what happened in the New Mexico desert fifty years ago became known, that image would be trashed a bit—perhaps deservedly, but probably not.

In any case, the army was home, and I decided to keep it clean.

I could always change my mind later, of course, but for now I'd keep it all to myself and, like Nick, just bury it all back up again.

Though, naturally, it stayed on my mind.

The rest of the week went slowly, though on Friday I completed a complicated wire transaction of the money Kravet had sent me to the account of Ellen Whittier at her Manhattan bank—in such a way that she wouldn't know how it came to be there.

Early Saturday morning Kats showed up for my truck, which left me stuck on post again with a long weekend ahead. During which time I promised myself to come to a decision about what to do with Kravet's ashes.

It occurred to me to reread his letter to see if there were some clue within it, so shortly after Kats left, that's exactly what I did.

Sitting by my window, the sound of rain hitting the pane, I read it through, half aloud, getting the texture of that evil man's words for the first time, especially now the end:

"So that's that," he'd written, "and if you think I'm sorry, you got another think coming, cause I didn't give a damn then and I don't now. My only regret is that I couldn't tell the story while I was alive.

"And that's the point—cause if you read this, you know I'm dead, and I'm telling you I was killed by some revenging son of a bitch.

"I don't know who, but out of the blue, some cops came sniffing around asking about Escarfalini, then that damn postcard came, and then I heard that Clarke and Newbury got killed—and I don't believe in coincidence.

"And now there's me, dammit, and I've been murdered, and you owe me.

"You owe me. You owe me revenge. You owe me finding out who killed me and making them suffer. You owe me, and you'll pay me, or you'll burn in hell right alongside you know who."

And as easy as a feather on the wind, the idea came into my mind, and that was that.

I hadn't thought a soul would be up and around at 0300, which is when I'd set my alarm for the burial detail, but I'd just burned the last page of the letter, letting its ashes powder the pile of darker ash below that were the last remains of Bill Kravet, when I heard our own

first sergeant bang his way in, and shout:

"How many times you people got to be told—there's no smoking in the damned latrine!"

Right.

"I put them signs up for a reason, you know?" he barked.

"Sorry, top," I said.

"Mr. Virginiak?"

"It's me," I ruefully acknowledged.

"Well, damn," he said gruffly. "You of *all* people should know better."

"I know," I agreed. "I should."

I flushed the toilet, then stepped through the door and up to the sink, where I washed my hands.

"Anyway," he grumbled on, "I thought you quit!"

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the December issue.

Jared Judd, president of Judd Toy Company, Inc., took pride in his enterprise. His key personnel would *never* leave, and his company showed a handsome profit every year. His own income was even greater than he reported to the IRS. All this came about because Mr. Judd was a clever, highly successful blackmailer.

His secretary was once a hit-and-run driver; his accountant, now a respectable and responsible mother of three, had been a teenage hooker; his foreman, threatened by a casino owner for large gambling debts, had robbed a store; his designer of toys, convicted of malicious mischief while running with a youth gang and sentenced to jail, escaped, and was now a wanted fugitive; his shipping clerk had, unknown to his wife, had an affair with a girl and fathered an illegitimate child; and his treasurer, in her tempestuous youth, had supplied the drugs for a party at which two of her companions died of overdoses.

Each staff member performed his or her duties at Judd Toys as though his future depended upon it—which it did. None made any complaint whatever about giving the boss a cash kickback at the end of every month.

Jared Judd gloried in his power over the six. It was his due; after all, he had gone to considerable trouble and expense to assemble the proofs of their dark pasts, which he kept securely locked in his office safe. He had not a care in the world.

One morning everything changed. As he strode into his office, one glance showed him the open safe. It had been broken into, and all his valuable evidence was gone. The mechanism had been drilled through quite neatly. It had to be one of his staff.

Judd sat down to reason it out. The guilty party would not leave the company immediately, for that would amount to an admission of guilt. But with enough pressure, he or she would wilt; they were not hardened criminals who could take the heat. He needed to isolate them, then accuse each separately.

"Sweetheart," he said to his secretary (with enjoyment watching her wince), "you are invited to spend the weekend on my island."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly—"

"Yes, you can," stated Judd positively. "But to put your puritan mind at rest, I'm also inviting the rest of the staff. We'll leave on my yacht at five on Friday. Now, get back to work."

No one said much during the voyage. Half an hour later, the island came into view. It had once served as a fishing camp, and a row of rustic cabins paralleled the shore. A larger building, presumably the former mess hall, stood at one side.

"Okay, everyone," said Judd, "the food for the weekend is below. Carry it to my quarters in the big house. You can take turns cooking. The cabins are numbered. I'm assigning you to cabins one through six. Well, let's get moving!"

A grim crew obeyed. One hell of a vacation, each was thinking.

From time to time, Jared Judd sought out each employee when he or she was alone. "What did you hope to gain by robbing my safe?" he asked. "Surely, you must know I have duplicate records of your past peccadilloes."

In response, each employee gave a feigned look of surprise. "Surely you don't think I had anything to do with that, do you?" each declared.

On Saturday, Judd went down to his yacht to check it over. It provided an opportunity for the six "guests" to confer.

"Then we're all agreed?" inquired Felicia.

"Absolutely!" replied Claude.

"Let's cut the cards," said Darlene. "High card does the job."

(1) The ages of the employees are 26, 27, 28, 30, 31, and 32. The accountant is two years younger than Bart and two years older than the person who chose cabin 5.

(2) A man and a woman have red hair; a man and a woman have blond hair; and the other two have dark hair. Mr. Jugland, the treasurer, and the person whose age is 27 have differently colored hair.

(3) Elvita, the person in Cabin 6 (who is not 27 years old), and the blond man have the last names of Gregory, Hillman, and Iverson.

(4) The three men include Mr. Landers, the gentleman in Cabin 1, and the one who is 31 years old.

(5) The three ladies include the secretary, the one who is 28 years old, and the brunette. None of them has the last name of Hillman.

(6) The youngest three of the six are (in one order or another) Darlene; the dark-haired man, and the one with the last name of Klembach.

(7) Cabins 2, 3, and 4 are occupied by Claude (who is not the shipping clerk), the redhaired man, and the person having the last name of Gregory.

(8) Alfred is younger than the foreman, but he is one year older than the person in Cabin 2.

At midnight a shot rang out in the direction of the large building. Five of the employees of Judd Toy Company remained where they were; the shot had been expected. After waiting an anxious ten minutes, they converged on Cabin 4. Felicia was the first to arrive, wearing a robe over her nightgown.

"How did it go?" she asked nervously.

"Exactly as planned," answered the occupant of the cabin.

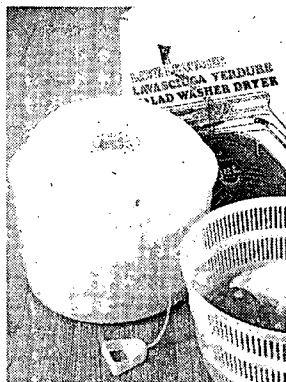
The two with dark hair then made their appearance. The woman said, "I'm glad it's finally over." The man added, "Amen!"

Iverson came in. "We will all back you up with the story we outlined: a stranger came to the island, held each of us up, and then went to the big building. You can decide what you will say was taken from each of you."

The oldest person among the six, who until then had been silent, addressed the occupant of Cabin 4: "You have our everlasting gratitude. When you drew the ace of spades, I wasn't sure you could do it. Now that our problems are solved—permanently—I guess all that nightlong drilling of the safe was well worth it. Hard work, but you all took your turn. Now let's pack up and return to the mainland in the old bastard's yacht to report this 'horrible murder.'"

Who actually shot Jared Judd?

MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

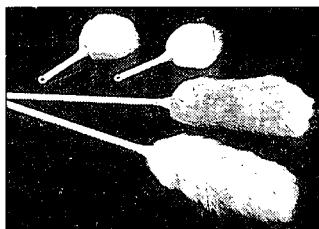


SPIN WASH, SPIN DRY

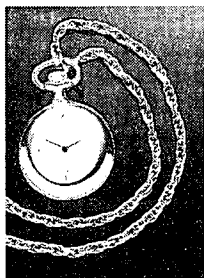
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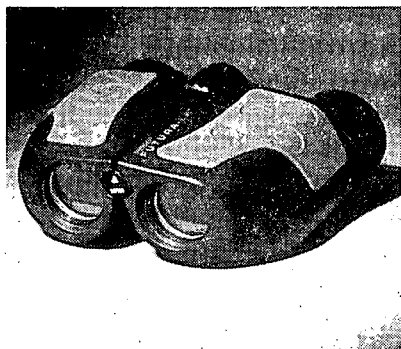
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FICTION

OPENING DAY

Jack Sine



Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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Mist beaded and ran down the glass patio doors of my den as I contemplated two pressing problems—one, my loving and treacherous wife, Caroline; the other, Hans Eschevarria, drug dealer and federal prisoner.

Since tomorrow was April first, the opening day of trout season, I decided to deal with the most immediate of the two problems—my wife.

My fishing gear covered the coffee table, surrounding a saucepan half full of water. I picked up a Foxtail spinner. The lure jingled as I held it over the pan. I let it drop and flinched as it hit the water. Nothing. The spinner bubbled down to the copper bottom. Should've known better. Caroline never used the same trick twice. But last year's stunt still burned in my memory.

Somehow last spring she had gotten hold of some sort of sodium powder and dusted all my lures with it. Sodium's that weird element that hates water so much it explodes when it gets wet. Which is what happened to me last year when my lure hit the middle of the big pool. Pow! And all the trout dived into hiding. I recognized Caroline's fine Italian hand. Figuring that she had booby-trapped all my lures, I decided to neutralize them in a stream-

side puddle. Big mistake. When I dumped them in, they went off like firecrackers on Chinese New Year. Baleful looks from the other fishermen drove me downstream to less favorable water.

For the twelfth straight year, thanks to the machinations of my loving wife, I returned home skunked on the opening day of trout season.

Our perennial April first conflict had begun six weeks after the lovely Caroline Cappolino, freelance artist, had, in the presence of priest, parents, and friends, wed Brian "Mickey" O'Shea, promising young patrolman. Our courtship had been swift and dizzying, so we really didn't know all about each other. For instance, she didn't know about my passion for trout fishing, and I didn't know about her superbly honed sense of revenge.

That year April first fell on a Saturday. When I told her nonchalantly on Thursday that I was going fishing, she smiled and said, "Oh, but you can't on Saturday. The Burkes and De-Mercurios are coming for a cookout. Remember?"

I told her I didn't remember because she hadn't told me about it. That started a yes-I-did, no-you-didn't contest which I ended by explaining the O'Shea family tradition re-

garding the opening day of trout season, that I hadn't missed an opening day since I was twelve, that it was really more than tradition, it was damned near religion, and I wasn't gong to miss Saturday. April first was sacred.

For a first fight, it didn't last long. Caroline calmed down and started humming. And I got a tad nervous. Once before, when we first started dating, she had done the same thing. Her roommate's oafish boyfriend had gotten drunk and passed out on Caroline's bed. When we couldn't budge him, she got mad. Then that calm humming started. She went into the bathroom and returned with a bottle of peroxide and a toothbrush. When the boyfriend woke up the next day, he found that his fine black beard had been transformed to bright orange.

Looking back, I should have given in and gone fishing on Sunday. But Irish stubbornness and family tradition will out. Caroline got up at three in the morning to make my coffee and lunch. My loving and dutiful wife. I think it was the coffee she laced with laxative. I spent most of the day behind a bush.

With each year she got cleverer, once cutting my line into twenty yard lengths and re-

winding it on the reel, another time removing all the hooks from all my lures and retying them with delicate thread. Six fish hit my lures that year, and each one escaped. Caroline took a twisted pleasure in the fact that opening day of trout season and April Fools' shared the same date.

While I sat and pondered how this year's treachery would manifest itself, she stuck her head around the doorway with a swish of dark hair.

"Oh, there you are," she said and breezed in, still lithe and beautiful despite her thirty-eight years. She set a drink down on the table next to the saucepan.

"I thought you might be thirsty." She smiled the wide, toothy smile she used to mask what she was really thinking.

"Thanks," I said. This was suspicious behavior. But all of Caroline's behavior preceding opening day was suspicious.

I sipped the vodka gimlet (my favorite) and puckered. "Ugh, too much lime juice."

Caroline was studying my prize five pound brown trout mounted prominently on the den wall. "Sorry," she said, smiling that smile again, her hazel eyes full of innocence. "I guess my hand slipped." And she flowed out of the room with that studied grace that can

only be achieved by long-limbed Italian women. The lime juice was so powerful I could smell it.

I got up and went into the kitchen and added enough vodka to dilute the lime juice. Have to be careful, I thought, don't want to get boozed up and oversleep.

My latest issue of *Field and Stream* was on the table still open to the article I had been reading on the sense of smell in trout. I sat down and picked up where I had left off. It was a long article dealing mostly with how trout rely heavily on smell to find food, particularly in muddy water. Salty bloodlike smells attract them and acidic smells repel them. Useful information, but I still had things to do to get ready for tomorrow so I put the magazine down and went back to the den.

Bedtime was getting close; I didn't have time to keep worrying about Caroline's latest ploy. I hadn't beaten her in twelve years, why should tomorrow be different? As I put my gear in order, I turned my mind to problem number two—Eschevarria.

Hans Eschevarria had been the biggest arrest of my career. He was the son of an Ecuadoran Indian girl and an immigrant German gunrunner. The mother died when he was six

without ever getting around to marrying her Teutonic lover, so Hans was stuck with his polyglot monicker. He got his education at his father's knee, where he learned about automatic weapons, Wagnerian opera, knives, classical literature, and painting. The father had a passion for painting flowers that Hans shared. Hans specialized in rendering exotic jungle blooms on crockery.

Hans grew up on the shady side of the law in Quito and drifted easily into Ecuador's wonderful world of cocaine. He was bright, eclectic, and thoroughly without conscience. Naturally he rose rapidly in the cartel. Eventually, he was assigned to New York to run the distribution end.

All of us on the drug task force knew Hans and what he did—we called him the Quito Connection. We just couldn't get anything on him. He was too clever to get caught with either drugs or dirty money.

Then I decided to try an end run and go at him through his finances. With the help of my computer and a friendly judge, I was able to get a look at his bank accounts. I checked out his lifestyle, his homes, his cars, and his girlfriends. When the file was thick enough, I cut a deal with the Feds to share credit for the bust, and they put

him away for ten-to-twelve on income tax evasion. Same way they got Capone. My stock was high, and everybody who mattered knew who had done all the work, including Eschevarria.

Not surprisingly, Hans wasn't content to sit still and turn out his handpainted crockery—a hobby permitted because it was “therapeutic.” No, he had to stir the pot. A couple of months before, cocaine had started turning up among the inmates at Hans's new home—Danbury Federal Prison. The prison increased its precautions, but the white powder continued to sift in, and as usual, all roads led to Hans. But as usual no one could prove it. When questioned, he just smiled and said, “Ask Mickey O'Shea.” It was his way of throwing down the gauntlet. Hans didn't care about the small change he made from selling to the other prisoners. He wanted to beat the guy who beat him. Quito macho.

The prison authorities checked everything that came in for him. They were particularly careful with the ceramics and paint he used. All the paints were opened and minutely checked before being turned over to him. The plain, glazed ceramic cups and coffee mugs he painted were dis-

creetly scraped on their unglazed bottoms and the powder sent to the lab for analysis. It always turned out to be pure fired potter's clay. But cocaine continued to drift into Danbury Federal.

Since Hans kept mentioning my name, the warden talked to my captain, who talked to my lieutenant, who suggested to me that it would be an excellent thing if I could come up with some good ideas. Fine. I had as many ideas on how Hans was getting his coke as I did on what Caroline had planned for me tomorrow.

Stifling a yawn, I put my two problems aside and made a final check of my equipment. This would be a special opening day. Instead of going to my usual spot on the famous Junction Pool in Roscoe, I was breaking a small tradition and heading for the Chimney Hole on the Esopus. It was almost as famous, less crowded, and forty-five minutes closer to the city. Maybe it would change my luck.

At six o'clock the next morning I was standing on a gravel bank on the shallow side of the pool, still feeling a little groggy from that kingsized gimlet last night. The deli coffee and egg sandwich (I'd bought my food on the road for the past eleven years) had helped some. I

looked around. There were only six other fishermen. Great. The Junction Pool would be almost shoulder-to-shoulder. I studied the water and flipped my Mepps spinner slightly upstream toward the rock wall on the other side. Caroline was very much on my mind as it splashed perfectly a foot from the rock and sank. I let the lure go down slowly as it drifted with the current, then I started a slow retrieve. The water was clear, and I could see the blade flashing fifteen feet away. And I could see something else—the bullet-shaped shadow of a medium-sized trout following the spinner. This was going to be it. Finally I would break the jinx and beat my beloved. I slowed the retrieve even more to encourage a strike, and the trout made his move. Then, suddenly, with a flick of his tail, he turned and descended back to the depths. Puzzled, I made another cast. The same thing happened again, this time with two small trout following, then turning away. Looking around, I saw that two of the other fishermen had trout on, so the fish were feeding. Must be the lure. Reeling in the Mepps, I walked up the bank to my tackle box and pulled out a Blue Fox Vibrax. Using nail clippers, I cut the line, put the original spinner in

the box, and tied on the new one. Odd. There was a slight smell of lime. Must have spilled that drink on something last night. Back to the pool.

But nothing worked. For two hours I changed lures, tactics, and locations as the men around me hauled in browns and rainbows in what must have been the best opening day in modern history. For everyone except Mickey O'Shea.

The story was always the same. The fish followed, showed interest, then turned away. Caroline. I knew it was her. But how?

Doggedly I had moved my rod back for another cast when a terrific thunderclap shook the woods and the sky opened up. My attention had been so completely focused on fishing that I hadn't noticed the clouds moving in. Rain was pouring down my neck as I reeled in my latest lure and dashed for the cover of a nearby evergreen. Twenty minutes later it was over. A typical spring storm with a few claps of thunder and a lot of water. I inspected my drenched clothes and returned to my tackle box to find I had left it open. It was half full of water. A day that had started with such promise was shaping up as one of Caroline's major triumphs. Might as well hang it up and go home.

When I bent to drain the box, I was almost knocked backwards by the smell of lime. It was so strong I could almost taste it. Holding my breath, I bent forward and put my finger into the collected rainwater. I tasted it. Limeade. It tasted like limeade! Light began to dawn. Some of the lures in the upper tray had escaped the deluge, and I picked one up. Carefully holding the treble hooks, I brought it to my mouth and delicately licked the smooth part of the body. Lime. Powerful and overwhelming. Suddenly things came together. The *Field and Stream* article on the kitchen table. Caroline bringing me a drink reeking of lime juice just after I had soaked a spinner. Ah, you sly critter. I held the spinner close, but all I could see was a faint sheen. Whatever she did, it was invisible.

"Ah, Caroline," I said, "I don't know how you did it, but I think I've finally got you."

Gently I selected four of my favorite spinners from the flooded box and took them to the bank. Three I left to soak in a shallow current. The fourth I soaked, rubbed, and tasted until the lime flavor was washed away. Snipping off the old lure, I put it to soak in the current with the other three and tied on the clean one.

Three casts later, my first opening day trout lay flopping on the gravel, and I was humming Irish drinking songs as I made my next cast. Two hours later I was in my car heading home with my ten-fish limit (one of them a beautiful three pounder) on ice in the trunk. I was still singing Irish drinking songs, but my mind was fixed solidly and contentedly on my other problem.

When I got home, Caroline was in the kitchen. She almost spoiled my triumphal entry when she smiled delightedly at my display of fat trout.

"Thank heavens that's over!" she sighed putting her arms around my neck and kissing me fervently. It never occurred to me that opening day was as draining on her as it was to me. We were both feeling like the newlyweds who had started this nonsense twelve years ago. But time for that later.

Sitting my devious darling down at the kitchen table, I asked her how she did it.

She smiled and said, "You know, it wasn't easy coming up with new mischief every year. Then I read that article about trout smelling things and started thinking about what would be acidic enough to discourage fish. I thought of pickle juice and vinegar, but I wasn't sure they'd be strong enough.

Then I thought of your beloved lime juice." She made a face because she had never liked the smell. "It was so concentrated it had to work."

"But how?" I asked. "How did you get it to stick to my lures?"

She smirked, "Ham glaze, you jerk. Well, kind of. I used a base of sugar and boiling water, added the lime juice, then experimented till I got a glaze that wasn't sticky but would melt in water. It took two weeks of trial and error to find the right formula." She laughed. "I'm so glad it's over. I couldn't have faced another April first."

Unfortunately, the newlywed feelings would have to wait a while. I went into the hall and made a quick phone call. Then I grabbed my coat and headed for the door.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" she asked with a hurt look.

"Danbury on business, my sweet," I smiled. "But not to worry, I'll be home soon to celebrate our victory. I'll bring a wine that goes well with trout."

Her eyebrows pulled together, creating a rare crease between her eyes. "Our victory?"

"I'll call and explain later," and I was out the door.

Driving up the New England Thruway, I wondered if I

hadn't been too abrupt with my dear wife. But I had been the one to suffer those twelve opening days. All she had to do was dream up sabotage. Besides, anticipation was a sweet sauce to joy, as someone must have said.

An hour and a half later I was sitting in an interrogation room at Danbury Federal with the assistant warden and a guard. I had a coffee mug in my hand, and a pan of water was steaming on a hot plate. There was a knock on the door, and two more guards ushered in my old pal Hans. He was short and dark with straight black hair like his mother and the aquiline nose and arrogance of his father. His eyes hesitated briefly as he saw me; then he smiled his macho smile.

"Well, Mickey, they finally brought in the big guns. You going to question me, big detective? You can't get lucky twice."

"Don't need luck, Hans. Just need my wife."

That puzzled him, and he looked around to gain time for his next remark. His eyes fell on the hot plate and stopped. I held up the coffee mug the warden had provided from Hans's stock.

"Like some coffee, amigo?" I asked with a polite smile.

His eyes flashed at me. I took the plain white, empty, glazed

mug over to the pan of water and lowered it slowly in. The water was warm, not hot. I lifted the mug out and ran my finger over the wet surface. The glaze came off on my fingertip. I licked the mug—much as I had tasted the lure I had cleaned that morning.

"Or maybe you'd prefer coke?" I said.

It's probably a good thing I don't know Spanish because I do believe my friend Hans called me some very bad

names. He had reason to be angry, though. He was going to spend a lot longer than ten-to-twelve in Danbury. So I forgave him.

I called the lovely Caroline and told her the whole wondrous tale and congratulated her on her contribution to the best combination of opening day and April Fools' ever.

When I got home a couple of hours later she met me at the door with a vodka gimlet. I sipped it. The lime was perfect.

SOLUTION TO THE OCTOBER "UNSOLVED":

Ed Pirrato was the inside man who masterminded the heist. He was after the Figgalo fire opal of Laura Van Lux in the eighth floor suite.

FLOOR	ROBBER	OWNER	GEM
8	Ed Pirrato	Laura Van Lux	fire opal
7	Caz Nawgood	Ilena Spooner	amethyst
6	Bo Rattlee	Greta Wharton	emerald
5	Fred O'Deeus	Kathy Tonwell	carbuncle
4	Al Maggoty	Julia Xavier	diamond
3	Dan Quirkey	Helga Upstern	brilliant

FICTION

Delicate Balance

Bob Tippee



Illustration by Vlad Guzner

121

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“Face it,” Gent Faraday was saying, “the main reason most of us moved to the ‘burbs was to get away from crime.”

Leo Bouras gripped the Weber cooker’s wooden handle and shook it, as though assuring himself that the smoke-seeping kettle top would not fall off. He glanced at Keith Wheatley, who kept his eyes on Gent and took a quick pull from a can of Coors Light. Gent and Keith sat on white plastic patio chairs facing the Weber cooker. Behind them, the shadow from Leo’s garage stretched over a lawn of St. Augustine grass splotched with stubborn Bermuda and enclosed in a seven foot tall wooden privacy fence. A lawn mower droned close by and out of sight. In the back yard’s far corner rested a swing set of silver and red galvanized steel.

Keith burped and smiled. “Friends, too. I mean this is a friendly place.”

“Everybody moved here from someplace else,” Leo said. “Which raises the question whether we’re really friends or just partners of convenience.”

Gent chuckled and shook his head. “Always the philosopher.” He had jet-black hair and a narrow face with a sharp chin and nose. His white polo shirt, tucked inside teak golf

slacks, betrayed the early makings of a beer gut. “I’m telling you, the main reason anybody moves twenty-five miles from downtown is to get the hell away from crime. Ten miles out in all directions, it’s a combat zone.”

The patio door, which led to the kitchen, squeaked open. The men snapped their heads toward it.

Becky Bouras stepped outside, smiling and squinting. Her white shorts and pink, sleeveless top gleamed in the slanting sunlight. She had short brown hair, deep-set black eyes, and the legs of a jogger. “How’s the chicken?” she asked.

Leo lifted the kettle lid. Pillows of white smoke fluffed out, smelling of carbon and Kansas City Special Barbecue Sauce. “Twenty minutes,” he declared when six red-coated split broilers sizzled into view beneath the smoke. “I can stretch it if you like.”

“Depends on when Gent thinks Kim’ll make it,” Becky said.

Gent frowned at his black watch. “Ought to be on the ground now. Probably carried her luggage on. Twenty, thirty minutes, I guess. Tell these guys why we all live way out here, Becky.”

"Schools," Becky said immediately. "Schools are better out here. Sorry to interrupt." She went back inside.

"Schools," Gent hissed, shaking his head. "Crime's the thing, which is why we've got to make sure it doesn't come our way."

Leo adjusted the kettle top again. "Schools stink inside the city limits." A lean six footer, he wore khaki shorts, a green L. L. Bean T-shirt, and leather moccasins with no socks. His face was narrower than Gent's but fairer, the chin and nose rounder, and he had blond, unruly hair.

"'Cause everybody who gave a damn moved out here on account of crime," Gent said. "Right, K. W.?"

Keith, round-faced and jiggly all over, nodded and burped. He wore bluejeans, wire-framed glasses, and a blue and white striped pullover shirt with no collar. "There it goes again," he said. "Leo's half-ton A.C. unit. Every time it cycles on, there's a flapping noise. Loose belt, probably. Glad to check it for you, Leo."

"Been making that noise for years," Leo said.

"We were talking about crime," Gent said.

"Insulate the old attic yet?" Keith asked.

Leo snapped his fingers and grimaced. "Damn. Keeps slipping my mind."

"We've got a problem," Gent said, almost yelling, tossing his hands up so suddenly beer sloshed out the top of the silver can in one of them.

"Leo's A.C. unit?" Keith asked.

"Crime, damn it," Gent said.

Leo opened a folding lawn chair that had been leaning against the back wall of his brick and frame two story. He sat down next to Keith, swigged beer, and said nothing. Keith looked first at Gent, then at Leo, then back at Gent. "What crime? What are we talking about?"

"Next door to me and Kim," Gent said. "Where the Sandersons used to live."

Keith crumpled his beer can and said, "I told Sandy a hundred times he ought to put a deadbolt on that side door."

"The new neighbor," Gent said. "Single guy, best I can tell. Single guy with a lot of great-looking girlfriends. And a lot of shaky looking other friends who visit him all hours of the night."

Leo leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "You been up late spying on him, Gent?"

"It's suspicious as hell," Gent said. "You've got a clear view of

it from here. You must've noticed."

"You mean you think he's selling dope or something?" Keith asked.

Gent shrugged.

"Or women?" Keith went on. Then he grinned. "Hookers? In Fairway Acres?" He chuckled. "You mean it?"

"There's something going on there," Gent said. "Cars pulling up all night long, staying for fifteen minutes, half an hour. Six last night."

Leo stood and collected empty beer cans. "You stayed up all night?"

"It's not like I had to get up early to go to the office," Gent said bitterly. "I finally called the county."

"Yeah," Leo said, smiling broadly. "I ran into Max Ranier at the Quick Shop. He was one pissed-off deputy."

"One worthless deputy is what he is," Gent said. "Walked up to the front door like he was making a social call, talked to the guy, came back to tell me he didn't see anything suspicious. Then he had the nerve to ask why the hell I keep calling him out on make-believe crimes. That's what he said: 'make-believe crimes.' You believe that?"

Keith said, "Might have something to do with the time you called him out about that prowler who turned out to be

Rosco Bayles adjusting his sprinkler system."

"It was after midnight," Gent said. "Nobody adjusts their sprinkling system that time of night."

"Rosco Bayles does," Keith said.

"Last night it was even later," Gent said. "Three cars I've never seen before parked right out there in the street. Don't tell me that's not suspicious."

Gent glowered at Keith, who thumbed his wire glasses higher onto his nose.

"More beer?" Leo asked. Gent and Keith both nodded. The back door whined when Leo opened it and carried the empties inside. Smoke from the Weber cooker and the garage's shadow covered all the back yard now. The air conditioner made a clattering bang and fell silent.

"Any interviews this week?" Keith asked.

"Few."

"Any offers?"

Gent shook his head.

"You're probably overqualified," Keith said. "Good engineers can always find work."

"I'm beginning to think somebody put out a bad word about me."

Leo came back outside holding two cans of beer and jingling a ring of keys. "Can you

believe it?" he said. "Becky and I throw a barbecue to celebrate everybody's kids' being at camp, and I forget to check the beer supply. Last two."

"We were talking about crime," Gent said.

"I'll just run up to the Quick Shop and be right back," Leo said, delivering the beers before turning toward the driveway. At the privacy-fence gate he turned back and said, "By the way, the new guy's name is John Farquerson. He served eighteen months at Huntsville for mail fraud. Ran a drug business up in Dallas, but that's all they could convict him on. He's friendly enough, but I get the impression he wants to be left alone. Check the chicken in five minutes or so?"

"Figure that guy, will you?" Gent said after Leo's Lumina van had growled away.

Keith swallowed beer and said, "Needs a tuneup, for sure. He doesn't do much maintenance."

"Waiting all this time to tell us he knew something about John—John—"

"Ferguson."

"I mean he's a great guy and everything," Gent said. "But hard to figure."

"John Ferguson?"

"Leo. The guy knows enough about investments to make his

living being a consultant, and he's way out here with his kids in public schools."

Keith said, "Main problem out here's subsidence."

"He had his chance, you know," Gent said. "Becky's brother—he's a surgeon up in Austin, makes bundles of money—her brother wanted to stake Leo to a position in Central Cities Pharmaceuticals. Leo recommended the stock but wouldn't put any of his own money in it."

Keith shook his head. "Probably thought it was too risky. Like I was saying, all the development out this way's pulling hard on the freshwater aquifers. We'll be on surface water in five, six years, and it'll cost a pretty penny. I mean, where's it gonna come from?"

"Couple of months, stock price tripled," Gent said. "Becky's brother made a killing."

"Leo probably did all right on commissions. Anyway, I knew about the groundwater problem all along, but Janet liked the schools out here, and when I heard they had first graders using Windows, well—"

"Becky almost left Leo over it," Gent said.

"I mean, first graders on Windows!" Keith said, then snapped his head toward Gent.

"Almost left Leo? How do you know that?"

Leo sipped beer, then said, "She and Kim talk. The point is, Leo ought to be driving a BMW instead of that needle-nosed Chevy and living in River Oaks, Tanglewood at least. Becky thinks so, too."

"Must like the schools out here," Keith said.

Without asking where to find it, Janet Wheatley pulled one of Becky's white plastic serving spoons out of the first kitchen drawer she opened. She tapped it on the side of a flat red serving dish on the butcher-block counter.

"This is your Tupperware piece," she said. "Keep the leftovers."

"Leo'll like that," Becky said, jerking a tray of rolls out of the oven. "He loves your seven-layer salad."

Janet thrust the serving spoon into the Tupperware dish and mixed cold peas, mayonnaise, onions, shredded lettuce, chunked cauliflower, crushed bacon, and Italian dressing, all neatly stacked and chilled overnight. The salad and rolls made Becky's kitchen smell fresh and warm.

Becky set the tray of rolls onto a trivet and slapped together matching blue hot pads. "Damn. Leo forgot to put on the

corn. I'll get some water boiling. Think you can get Keith and Gent to shuck?" She knelt in front of the wooden cabinet beneath her maple-paneled service island, swung open the door, and slid out a deep, aluminum pot.

"No problem," said Janet, a petite, herky-jerky brunette in a white and red sundress. She pretended to preen her hair, then smoothed the dress seductively over her torso. "Afterward, maybe they'll peel the husks off the corn for me."

Becky rolled her eyes, pointed to a pantry next to her harvest-gold refrigerator, and said, "Corn's in a paper sack on the floor to the right."

Janet carried the sack outside and returned, saying, "Like always, I had to assure Keith he did great."

Chuckling and shaking her head, Becky said, "Tell him if he'd only—never mind." She set her hands on her hips and looked from the kitchen into the dining room. "Table's set. Relish tray's ready. Water's boiling. Salad's mixed. Tea's cold. Rolls—got to keep the rolls warm." She slid the rolls into a bowl, set it inside the oven, and twisted knobs.

"All that's missing are the kids," Janet said.

Becky stood up. "I'm trying not to think about it."

"Drive you nuts when they're underfoot," Janet said. "Drive you nuts when they're not around."

"What are you going to do this fall now that both of yours'll be in school all day?" Becky asked.

Janet took a carrot stick from the relish tray and crunched it. "I'm—"

Becky joined her: "—trying not to think about it."

Crossing the kitchen to the refrigerator, Becky produced a loosely corked bottle of white wine and pulled two long-stemmed glasses from the cabinet alongside. She filled the glasses and carried them to the white legged, wood topped kitchen table, leaving the bottle on the service island. The women sat and sipped wine.

"Sometimes I think Kim's got the right idea," Becky said, sighing. "Let somebody else raise your kids."

Janet reared back. "You're kidding. Tell me you're kidding. I mean, would you trade places?"

"You know," Becky said with a shrug. "There's some stuff kids need that anybody can provide. Then there's stuff only parents can give. I wouldn't mind help with the stuff that doesn't need me attached."

Janet nodded. "But how do you tell that stuff from the other kind?"

Becky licked her lips and took another sip of wine. "I'd ask Kim, only the way her kid's turning out doesn't exactly make her an authority."

Water had condensed on the wineglass and dripped onto the wood tabletop in front of Janet. Carefully she slid the glass over the thin pool between delicate fingers. "I promised I wouldn't repeat this, but—that equestrian school Kim and Gent sent Megan to this summer? Remedial education for problem kids. Her teacher recommended it. That or she had to repeat third grade."

"Doesn't surprise me," Becky snapped. "I just wonder how they can afford it. Gent's been out of work for—what? A year and a half now?"

Janet peered out the kitchen window toward the patio. "Look at Keith, hanging on Gent's every word like it came from a prophet or something. Worships the guy. Fellow engineers."

"I can't figure out why Gent's had such bad luck," Becky said.

Janet sipped wine, dripping more water onto the tabletop. "Keith says he's had lots of offers. He's just waiting for the right one. Won't settle for anything that doesn't meet his standards. By this time, Keith'd be stacking boxes at Wal-Mart."

Becky stared through the window at Keith and Gent. "Gutsy, if it's true," she said. "Setting high standards. Sticking to them."

"Too gutsy for a guy with a wife and daughter," Janet said. "There's something to be said for a guy being steady like Keith. Leo, too, of course."

"Yeah," Becky said, still looking out the window. "Steady. Like Leo."

"I just can't see sitting back and doing nothing," Gent said, sliding onto his plate half a chicken caked with barbecue sauce now more black than red.

Becky scanned the table again and said, "I hate starting without Kim." She had decorated the dining room with antiques: a cherrywood china cabinet and side table that almost matched, a Colonial long table and chairs, a ladder-back chair next to the doorway leading to the front foyer.

"She'll be here," Gent said.

"Do nothing about what?" Janet asked.

Keith, smiling, dug a serving spoon into the seven-layer salad, now in a wooden bowl. "The dope dealer who moved into the Sandersons' house."

"Dope dealer?" Janet asked.

Becky snapped her head toward Leo. "Did you know anything about that?"

Gent said, "Leo talked to the guy."

Leo, with everyone watching, took a bite of chicken, chewed slowly, swallowed. "Friendly enough guy. Just wants to be left alone. I think we should leave him alone."

"You said he served time at Huntsville," said Gent, not touching his food.

Becky interrupted: "He told you that?"

"He told me a lot," Leo said, not looking at her. "We had a nice talk. He didn't say anything about Huntsville, and I didn't ask."

Gent slapped his fork down next to his plate. "So how the hell do you know he served time?"

Leo shrugged and wiped his lips with his napkin. "I noticed the cars coming and going late at night like you did. Asked a client of mine, private investigator, if he could find out anything. It was mail fraud, not drugs."

Keith said, "Mail fraud's what they convict them on when they can't make something more serious stick."

"So John Ferguson's a crook," Gent said.

"Farquerson," Leo said.

Janet, eyes bulging, asked, "Is he dangerous?"

"Not if we leave him alone," Leo said.

"I can't believe you," Gent said. He turned to the others. "I can't believe this guy. An ex-con moves into a nice, peaceful neighborhood like this, and we're supposed to just do nothing and leave him alone."

"Maybe not leave him alone altogether," Leo said. "We could invite him to block parties and stuff like that, take the kids by his place on Halloween. I think he'd probably like that. I don't know if he'd come to block parties, though."

"Leo!" Becky blurted.

Leo turned his palms up and looked around the table. "So what else are we going to do? Gent's already seen to it that Max Ranier'll never look into any real problems on this block. And there won't be any problems if we don't go doing something crazy because we think we've just got to do something, no matter what."

"I resent that," Gent said.

Leo ignored him. "Of course —" He lowered his eyes and shook his head.

"What?" asked Janet.

Leo finished another bite of chicken. "John no doubt knows who called the law out on him."

Gent took a deep breath and angrily bit into his chicken. Nobody said anything for a few minutes. Then Leo added, "I don't think he'll do anything about it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Gent asked.

Leo hunched his shoulders and shook his head. "You're the one who's worried about having the guy in the neighborhood. What do you think it means?"

Gent glowered at him and breathed heavily, saying nothing.

"Didn't mean to start an argument," Leo said calmly. "I'm just saying maybe we don't automatically need to do something just because a guy who served time moved into the neighborhood. Especially when I haven't heard what it is we're supposed to do."

"That's logical," Keith said, nodding. He chomped on a lavishly buttered roll.

Becky snorted gently. "There's something you're not telling us," she said to Leo.

Gent said, "Maybe you'd feel different if you lived next door to an ex-con."

"Of course," said Keith, "Leo and Becky do live right across the street from him."

Before Gent could respond, Becky asked, "So what is it you're not telling us?"

Gent said, "An ex-con's an ex-con in my book. And this ex-con lives next door to me."

Leo chewed a large mouthful of salad. The air conditioner clicked off, the hum momentarily noticeable for having

ended. Cauliflower chunks crunched between Leo's teeth. A mantel clock ticked atop the china cabinet.

Leo swallowed his salad. "The guy's walking a tight-rope," he said. "John Farquerson, I mean. Cops know he's here. He's got a parole officer. Last thing he needs is trouble."

"So what about the cars all hours of the night?" Gent asked.

"My client told me he's running a network of street spies who keep track of various pimps, drug dealers, and assorted other unpleasant characters downtown. Nothing illegal about it. John's got to be careful not to get too close to other ex-cons. Uses middlemen. That's who we see out here nights."

"I don't get it," Keith said. "What's the point of spying on bad guys?"

Leo shrugged. "Information's valuable. People pay good money for it."

"Like cops?" Janet asked.

"Drug dealers and pimps," Leo said, shaking his head. "People who want to know what their competitors are doing. They pay good money for information like that, just like regular businesses do."

Janet chuckled wickedly. "Bet a lot of people want him dead."

"John's smart," Leo said. "Apparently, he put out word that if he ends up dead the cops'll find out stuff a lot of bad guys don't want them to. And the cops don't get in the way because when one of the pimps or drug dealers starts freelancing, which is the kind of thing that ends up with a lot of people dead, John leaks something incriminating to people he knows on the vice squad. So the cops know he'll help them out from time to time to keep things from exploding. Plus, he knows who the cops' snitches are, which cops are taking bribes, secrets he could sell or give away if he needed to. He's smart."

Becky said, "That's what you call a delicate balance."

Leo went on. "John's the only one who knows both where the information comes from and who buys it."

"Information's power to people who know how to use it," Keith said.

"You sound like a computer commercial," Janet said.

Gent stood up, set his hands on his hips, and shook his head. "I still don't like it. Not at all. An ex-con right next door. I don't like it."

"You do something about it," Leo said calmly, "you upset John's delicate balance." He nodded toward Becky as

though to acknowledge the source of his phrase. "You've got to understand how important that delicate balance is to him."

"You're scared," Gent said.

Leo shook his head. "I haven't done anything to get on his bad side."

Becky grunted disgustedly and said, "It doesn't make any difference. Someday somebody's going to catch onto this guy and come out here and spray the neighborhood with bullets hoping one of them lands in John Ferguson's forehead."

"Farquerson," Keith said.

Becky ignored him. "God knows where the rest of those bullets'll end up."

"Won't happen," Leo said.

"You bet your kids' lives on that?" Becky asked.

"I trust smart people not to do stupid things," Leo said.

Gent crossed his arms and puffed his chest. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I trust John's delicate balance," Leo said. "And I trust his brains. If things get hopeless, he'll be long gone before anybody else figures out he's vulnerable."

"I say we go tell him to get the hell out of the neighborhood," Gent said.

"Count me out," Leo said firmly.

"But the kids—" Becky began as a car rumbled by outside.

"Kim's home," Gent muttered.

"Anybody want more salad?" Leo asked.

Keith raised a finger and accepted the bowl from Leo. Janet took another roll and pulled it slowly into halves. Gent sighed and pushed chicken scraps around his plate with his fork.

Becky broke the silence. "Delicate balance. To me that sounds like rationalization."

"Of what?" Leo asked.

"I don't know," Becky said, her voice almost a whine of frustration. "Doing nothing, I guess. It feels so... so complacent."

"She's right—" Gent began, but the telephone in the kitchen interrupted him. Becky excused herself and answered it, returning to announce, "Gent, it's Kim. She wants you to run over right away. Didn't say why. Sounded pretty upset."

Gent, frowning, left through the front door.

Becky sat back down and turned to Leo. "Looks like you've already decided to handle this your usual way," she said.

With a piece of roll Leo mopped streaks of barbecue sauce off his plate. "Keith," he

said, "what do you think we ought to do about this?"

Keith glanced at Janet, who stared at him with her eyes wide. "I think—I mean, Gent's probably right. We ought to do something. Don't you think?"

"But what, exactly?" Leo asked.

Keith and the two women stared at him. No one answered. Leo pressed. "What, exactly, do you all have in mind? You say we should do something? Well, what?"

Again, no one had an answer. "We can always handle it Gent's way," Leo said finally. "We can stomp over there and say, 'Mr. Farquerson, we know what you do for a living, and we don't like it.' Then what?"

Becky tossed her napkin onto the table next to her plate. "Don't be silly."

Keith said, "Gent'll think of something. He always does."

Leo looked at his plate, shook his head, and chuckled. "He'll think of something, all right. He'll do something for sure. Just like he did something on his last job. Did you hear about that? A week and a half with the firm, and he marches right up to the vice-president of engineering and tells him how screwed up his bid review procedures are. Ask him. He likes to brag about it."

"Maybe the guy's procedures really were screwed up," Becky said softly.

"Wasn't very smart, if you ask me," Keith said, frowning.

"Gutsy," Janet said.

"I helped him get that job," Keith said. "Recommended him. Told them he had judgment."

"The point is," Becky said, "if you two guys worked with Gent and the procedures were screwed up and Gent wanted to raise the issue, would you back him up or sit on your butts and do nothing?"

"Sometimes," Leo said, "doing nothing accomplishes more than you think."

The front door swung open, and Gent and Kim shuffled in. Gent's face was taut and red. Kim, tall and thick-waisted in a grey skirt and off-white blouse, held her arms crossed over her belly and didn't look up at her neighbors.

"He's done it now," Gent said, his words clipped and his voice shaking. "The son of a bitch killed my dog."

"I—I found him," Kim said. She looked up. Her eyes were red. "These, too." She set a palm-sized box on the table. Becky picked it up.

"Poison peanuts," she said. "Says, 'For control of gophers, moles, and other pests. Keep

out of reach of children and pets.”

“John Ferguson,” Gent said.

“Farquerson,” Keith said.

Leo asked, “How can you be sure?”

Kim said, “I can’t believe Muggs let a stranger come into the back yard and get close enough to—” Tears filled her eyes, and she clasped a hand over her mouth. Becky stood up, gripped Kim’s shoulders, and guided her into the chair Gent had vacated.

“I’m going over there,” Gent declared. “I’m going over there right now.”

“Me, too,” said Keith. “How ‘bout you, Leo?”

Leo leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. “I want to know what evidence we have that it was John Farquerson.”

Gent yelled, “What is it with you, anyway? What else do you need to know? The guy’s pissed I called out the law on him. He’s getting back. He thinks I’ll mind my own business now. Well, damn it! He is my business.”

“I think we should all go over there,” Becky said. She looked at Leo.

He shook his head. “You don’t have any basis for your accusation. And you don’t know what you’re getting yourselves into.”

Gent clenched his teeth and breathed deeply. “You’re scared, Leo. You’re just scared.”

Leo lowered his head but looked up at Gent through angrily narrowed eyes. His voice was no longer calm when he said, “I don’t give a good god-damn what you think. For the sake of everybody else here, I’m just asking you to consider the risk and decide whether it’s worth taking. The guy’s an ex-con, Gent. He’s smart, but he’s an ex-con. Think about what you’re getting yourself into. For once, think about it.”

“Keith,” Gent said, not taking his eyes off Leo. “You with me?”

“I—uh . . .”

“No,” said Janet. “Leo’s right. Call the sheriff or something.” She grabbed her husband’s arm. “Come on. It’s getting late.”

Keith shrugged, and quickly he and Janet were gone.

Gent paced the floor by the front door. Leo didn’t move from his chair. Kim said, “I’ll help with the dishes,” started to get up.

“Damn it, man!” Gent blurted, and Kim sat back down. “How can you just do nothing?”

Leo shrugged and said nothing. Becky jerked herself to her feet, grabbed the salad bowl

and her plate, and twisted away from the table toward the kitchen.

Kim pressed her forehead with one of her palms and said, "I want to get to the bottom of this. Gent, let's you and me go over there. With two of us, he'll be civil."

Becky stepped back into the dining room. "It could be dangerous."

Kim looked at Leo, who slowly shook his head. "It won't be dangerous," he said. "Sorry about this, Kim."

She stared at him for a couple of seconds, then turned toward Gent and the front door.

"Thanks for dinner," Gent said bitterly as he and his wife left.

Leo sat still as a statue. Becky glowered at him, then announced, "I'm calling the sheriff's office."

"No need," Leo said.

"I can't believe you," Becky said. "You won't do anything at all about this. What? Is it too risky even to call in the law when you think something dangerous might be about to happen?"

Leo shook his head. "No need, that's all."

"Gent was right: You're scared."

"No reason to be scared. I already know what's going to happen over there."

"Very convenient," Becky said.

"Instead of asking John Farquerson whether he saw anything suspicious in Gent and Kim's back yard, Gent's going to start right out making accusations he can't prove. It's his way. Especially with Kim along. He's got to prove something to her. He's always trying to prove something to somebody."

"Forget Gent's problem," Becky said. "What does John Farquerson do about it?"

"He hits Gent in the face with something Gent's not ready for: information. The same information he hit me with when I tried to be neighborly and he wanted to tell me he just wanted to be left alone."

"Information? What information?"

"Information about how Gent spends his days when Kim's at work and all the other husbands in the neighborhood are, too."

"And you believe an ex-con who makes an insinuation like that?"

"Of course, John doesn't know names, so he can't identify anybody."

"Well, then," Becky said, "this 'information' doesn't sound very good to me."

Leo lurched across the table and grabbed Becky's wrist. He grabbed it hard.

"But my client the private detective did a good job filling in the blanks."

Becky shuddered. "You—" She stopped herself and closed her eyes. "John Farquerson. He'll tell Kim."

Leo let go of her wrist, sighed, and slumped in his chair. Becky closed her eyes,

crossed her arms over her belly as Kim had done minutes earlier, and rocked slightly as though in pain. The air conditioner whooshed on.

"I got to where I really hated that dog," Leo said, his voice suddenly pinched, shaking his head. A tear spilled out of each eye. "Damn thing reminded me of Gent."

(continued from page 10)

care of the scripts. Like the novels, it was narrated in the first person: "I grinned at her—the kind of grin that called her a liar—a beautiful half-blondeliar," and "I didn't want to crash the party, but I had two good reasons—both of them cooling off in the morgue."

A somewhat gentler detective returned to the comics in March 1954 when a new *Sherlock Holmes* strip started. It was written by Edith Meiser; Frank Giacoia got the artist credit. Meiser, a Broadway actress as well as a writer, had

scripted a Holmes radio show in the thirties. For the strip, she adapted some Doyle stories and invented new adventures of her own, including one in which the evil mastermind Professor Moriarty plotted to unleash the black plague on Edinburgh.

A few of the above strips are still with us, among them *Dick Tracy* and *Rip Kirby*, but the heyday of the comic strip detective is long gone and it's unlikely, since humor has come to dominate the funnies, that there will be any new newspaper sleuths in the future.

FICTION

WHERE DOES A GOLEM GO?

Bernice F. Weiss



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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My name is Shayne Bruche (you could translate that as Beautiful Blessing, but that's neither here nor there!), and my wagon was stolen. I'm from Laffinstok. That's a shtetl (what I guess you would call a quaint little village). Not much happens there any more. But once, ah, once we had a golem! And that's what I think stole my wagon.

A golem is what you would call a robot. I guess the best-known one—before ours—was in Prague in the sixteenth century. Jews were being persecuted, and Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, a very righteous man who knew a lot about mystical arts, made a golem. It went out and avenged wrongs that had been done to innocent people.

Well, here in Laffinstok one year the crops failed, and when that happened, folks became what you would call cranky and looked for someone to blame. So they looked and they found us. Already Yankel had been pelted with rocks, and Surah Leah's house had been partly burned down, and others had been threatened. So the members of the Jewish community decided we needed a golem.

Now, in the sixteenth century, when Rabbi Loew had troubles like this, he got Instructions From Above. He took two trusted disciples almost as righteous as he was and went up to the synagogue attic, and there in a dark, stuffy corner they found a shapeless mass of clay.

They shaped it the way they had been told to, and the rabbi, in a trembling voice, chanted the Secret Name.

Then he blew the breath of life into the figure and placed a piece of parchment containing the name of God into its mouth. The golem would, of course, be mute because only the Almighty, blessed be He, can grant the gift of speech. So the creature went out to guard the ghetto; it got such revenge on all who had harmed Rabbi Loew's people that there were no more acts of wickedness, believe you me!

Well, here in Laffinstok we didn't have any Rabbi Loew to make us a golem, but we did have Rabbi Itzik ben Fishel, and he's the one we sent a committee to see, headed by our ritual slaughterer, Shmuel from Finsk.

The rabbi hesitated at first, but finally he said he'd try. Now, you need special ingredients and there are special rules to make a golem. In Laffinstok, they had to change a few things.

For example, the rabbi from Prague took his brightest and most righteous scholars to help him. Rabbi Itzik's students were, well, not exactly bright and not exactly righteous; they were, well, will-

ing. So he settled for the two nearest at hand.

With Reuben Narkopf (who happens to be my nephew, may no evil eye harm him!) and Shimon Klieger, (Shmuel's grandson), the rabbi headed for the attic of the synagogue as Rabbi Loew had done. Then they suddenly remembered our synagogue had only one floor. So they decided to use the little dark back room instead. That's where they kept the table they used for the refreshments put out after services.

Well, miracle of miracles! My nephew told me there in the shadows, on that table, they saw a huge lump. The lump had a shape like a man—and it's a good thing because there was no clay in Laffinstok and all they had brought with them was dirt and cobwebs from the corners of the sanctuary.

So Rabbi Itzik went closer and breathed into the thing's nostrils. Right away, the creature let out such a snore it shook the table, the pile of prayer books, and the roof as well.

On their way over, they had searched the houses, the ritual baths, and a few small shops for the parchment they needed but couldn't find any. So they had to use the paper sack from Reuben's lunch. The moment had come to write The Name.

Unfortunately, Rabbi Itzik couldn't write it because his reading glasses had broken when Reuben sat on them. Reuben couldn't do it because his hands were still greasy from rushing through his lunch so they could have the paper sack. It was up to Shimon. He wrote—the only name he could, his. Listen, it took him long enough to learn to do that!

They put the paper in the golem's mouth. It came to life. The Almighty, blessed be He, had let them succeed. When it tried to speak and couldn't, and when they saw how big it was, they knew the old legend was true and that they had their protector.

The golem sat up, and Reuben said it had a powerful body, with broad shoulders and long arms and legs and muscles all over. Its face was goodlooking with fair skin, reddish hair and beard, and blue eyes. It stood up and it towered over the rabbi and the boys. They went back to the main sanctuary to say prayers of thanks, but they got a little stuck trying to all get through the door at the same time.

When they straightened themselves out, they were very happy, but Rabbi ben Fishel had something new to worry about. In the old legend he knew Rabbi Loew had taken the life out of the golem every Friday at sundown to make sure it wouldn't by mistake do

something that is forbidden on the Sabbath, just because it didn't know any better. The rabbi wasn't too sure how to do that, but he told the boys that if he could create a golem, he was sure he could solve this problem as well.

In the old story, Rabbi Loew's golem managed to get out one Sabbath and went on a rampage, punishing good and evil alike, and it had to be destroyed. Rabbi Itzik didn't want (God forbid!) to have anything like that happen. So he asked for advice. Reuben's father suggested locking the golem up in an attic and Shimon said his Zayde Chaim said to bury it in clay every Friday night till Saturday sundown.

None of the houses in Laffinstok had attics, and we know already there was no clay in the shtetl. So it was decided to simply lock the golem up every Friday night before nightfall.

The only house with a lock was mine. My late father (of blessed memory) had been a locksmith.

Of course, with no locks on any doors here in Laffinstok, my father's business was not good (may you not know from such aggravation). He spent his time installing locks in my house. I have four on the outside door, one on the door of each of my two rooms, six on the drawers in my kitchen, and he put in new ones every year. Anyway, that's why they brought the golem to my place to be confined every Sabbath.

This was working out very well. It had a corner of my kitchen to stay in, and when I got back from services on the women's side of the curtain at the synagogue, I would unlock my door, go in, and carefully relock it. Usually, it was snoring away peacefully by then, but if it was still awake, I would share a little news, a little gossip, whatever—even if it couldn't talk back, I wanted to be friendly.

The golem walked around the village, and when everyone saw how big and strong it was, we all felt protected. It made people think twice before bothering us. When Yankel Lieb was threatened again, the person responsible spent a week in bed. The golem never actually touched him, but after seeing the creature come after him with those gigantic fists clenched, the culprit needed seven days of bed rest to stop shaking.

Then when a group tried to burn down Surah Leah's house, the golem blew out their torches and lifted their wagons up in the air, horses and all. They spent the next few weeks swearing they would never try anything like that again. Any bully who bothered any one of the rabbi's community found himself cleaning out ditches or

scrubbing the streets with the golem watching him with a scowl on its face and a switch in its strong hand.

Most of the time the golem spent at the rabbi's house, and one day the strangest thing happened. The golem had been eating the same food as the rabbi's family, and they were having some herring when all of a sudden the golem croaked out, "Is there any more herring, please?"

Magda Misa, the rabbi's wife, said the next day that she had started to put the extra herring on its plate when her arm froze in midair as she realized what had happened.

So she tells me the rabbi said to her, "Magda, give it the herring"; then he stopped like the one struck by Heaven. When he realized that *the golem had spoken!* A golem does not speak. How was this? Was Rabbi Itzik more powerful than the ancient Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel? Was the Almighty, blessed be He, *not* the only one who could grant the gift of speech to a golem?

Well, all of us in the village heard about how our rabbi had not only created a golem but had made one who could speak. People in neighboring towns heard, and they agreed our rabbi was the most wonder-working, miracle-performing rabbi ever.

People started coming to Laffinstok from everywhere, near and far, to ask our wonder-working rabbi for his help with their problems and to see and hear the talking golem.

So this one Friday night I got back from the services with the most exciting news. A famous chazzan, a cantor that is, had come to our shtetl all the way from Kommonstok with an amazing story.

It seems a friend of his had come to Laffinstok to sell his goods several months ago, and had been outside our synagogue one stormy night. He saw someone enter our little house of worship, someone very large and very wet from the storm. Shlomo the Chazzan was looking for a large person, a young man who had promised to marry his daughter Elka back in Kommonstok and then run away. It seems the man was called Eliezar ben Moshe and had lived a very hard life.

Being such a large child, he had listened to his mother recite what a long and painful labor he had caused; later he had listened to his Hebrew teacher complain about how many benches he had broken that were meant for much smaller boys; in his teens he had listened to his parents complain about how much food it took to feed him, and he had run away from home.

Where he landed was in Kommonstok, where the cantor took him in and started teaching him to be a chazzan. That is when Elka broke her engagement to a young man of Kommonstok and told her father she wanted to marry Eliezar. Only Eliezar thought he was too young to get married and left in a hurry, to go who knew where? So when Shmuel heard that a person fitting Eliezar's description had been seen in Laffinstok, he came here to ask around.

Learning about the marvelous golem, he decided to see if it would help him to find the missing Eliezar—and to punish him for wronging his darling little Elka.

Since the golem was still awake when I got home, I started telling it the news I had just heard. In my excitement, for the first time, I guess I forgot to lock my door. The next morning, the golem was gone. And so was my wagon!

Now some of the people in the shtetl said the legend must have come true after all because if the golem drove my wagon on that Friday night or Saturday morning, it was breaking the rules against riding on the Sabbath.

Others said the rabbi never made a golem at all, that there must be some ordinary explanation for what had happened. Until it stole my wagon, I think the golem did its job well, keeping our people from danger, and who's to say what the Almighty, blessed be He, can do? If He wanted to turn a paper sack into parchment, or Shimon Klieger's name into a Holy Name, who are we to say what's possible?

Anyway, my beloved sister-in-law, the one who can read, got a letter from a friend in America saying she saw a play there in the Yiddish theater, called *The Golem*. She said the play was so good they called the author up on the stage and he made a speech. He was a tall, redhaired, large man, she said, with a speaking voice so beautiful he could have been a cantor!

So do you think my wagon is now in America?

NOTE: A somewhat different version of "Where Does a Golem Go?" appeared in Philadelphia in the Fall 1993 issue of *Inside*, the quarterly magazine of The Jewish Exponent, under the title "The Golem of Laffinstock."—ED.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

OR ALL THE SEAS WITH OYSTERS

Avram Davidson

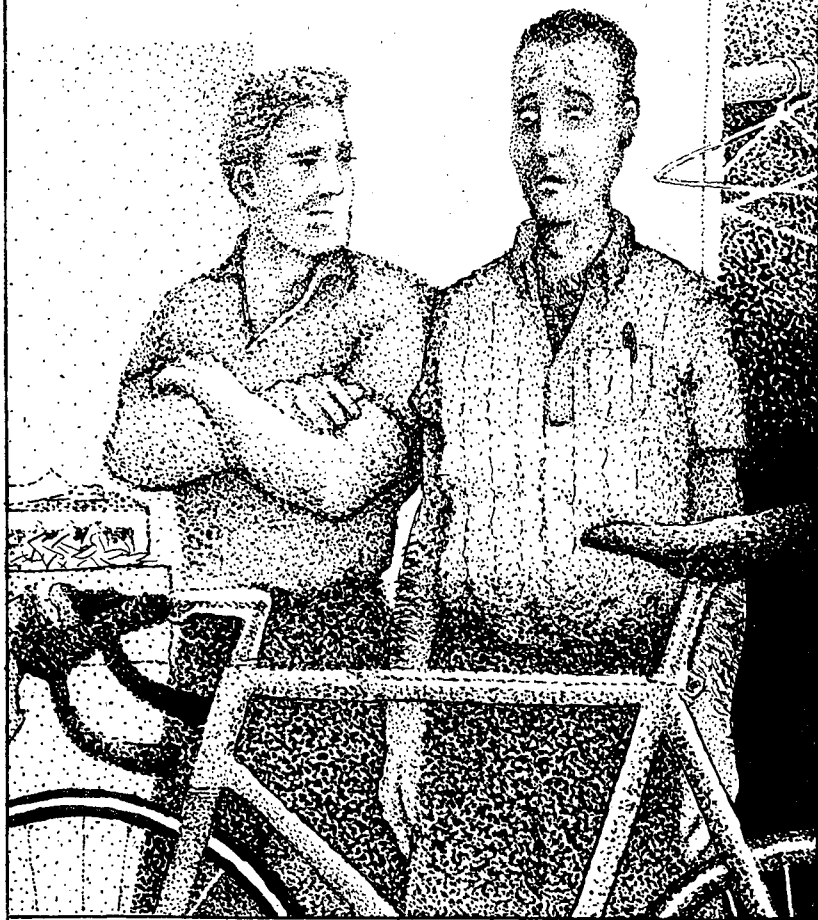


Illustration by Mark Penta

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When the man came in to the F & O Bike Shop, Oscar greeted him with a hearty "Hi there!" Then, as he looked closer at the middle-aged visitor with the eyeglasses and business suit, his forehead creased and he began to snap his thick fingers.

"Oh, say, I know you," he muttered. "Mr.—um—name's on the tip of my tongue, doggone it . . ." Oscar was a barrel-chested fellow. He had orange hair.

"Why, sure you do," the man said. There was a Lions' emblem in his lapel. "Remember, you sold me a girl's bicycle with gears, for my daughter? We got to talking about that red French racing bike your partner was working on . . ."

Oscar slapped his big hand down on the cash register. He raised his head and rolled his eyes up. "Mr. Whatney!" Mr. Whatney beamed. "Oh, *sure*. Gee, how could I forget? And we went across the street afterward and had a couple of beers. Well, how you *been*, Mr. Whatney? I guess the bike—it was an English model, wasn't it? Yeah. It must of given satisfaction or you would of been back, huh?"

Mr. Whatney said the bicycle was fine, just fine. Then he said, "I understand there's been a change, though. You're all by yourself now. Your partner . . ."

Oscar looked down, pushed his lower lip out, nodded. "You heard, huh? Ee-up. I'm all by myself now. Over three months now."

The partnership had come to an end three months ago, but it had been faltering long before then. Ferd liked books, long-playing records, and high-level conversation. Oscar liked beer, bowling, and women. Any women. Any time.

The shop was located near the park; it did a big trade in renting bicycles to picnickers. If a woman was barely old enough to be *called* a woman and not quite old enough to be called an *old* woman, or if she was anywhere in between, and if she was alone, Oscar would ask, "How does that machine feel to you? All right?"

"Why . . . I guess so."

Taking another bicycle, Oscar would say, "Well, I'll just ride along a little bit with you, to be sure. Be right back, Ferd." Ferd always nodded gloomily. He knew that Oscar would not be right back. Later, Oscar would say, "Hope you made out in the shop as good as I did in the park."

"Leaving me all alone here all that time," Ferd grumbled.

And Oscar usually flared up. "Okay, then, next time *you* go and leave *me* stay here. See if I begrudge you a little fun." But he knew,

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of course, that Ferd—tall, thin, pop-eyed Ferd—would never go. “Do you good,” Oscar said, slapping his sternum. “Put hair on your chest.”

Ferd muttered that he had all the hair on his chest that he needed. He would glance down covertly at his lower arms; they were thick with long black hair, though his upper arms were slick and white. It was already like that when he was in high school, and some of the others would laugh at him—call him “Ferdie the Birdie.” They knew it bothered him, but they did it anyway. How was it possible—he wondered then; he still did now—for people deliberately to hurt someone else who hadn’t hurt them? How was it possible?

He worried over other things. All the time.

“The Communists . . .” He shook his head over the newspaper. Oscar offered an advice about the Communists in two short words. Or it might be capital punishment. “Oh, what a terrible thing if an innocent man was to be executed,” Ferd moaned. Oscar said that was the guy’s tough luck.

“Hand me that tire iron,” Oscar said.

And Ferd worried even about other people’s minor concerns. Like the time the couple came in with the tandem and the baby basket on it. Free air was all they took; then the woman decided to change the diaper and one of the safety pins broke.

“Why are there never any safety pins?” the woman fretted, rummaging here and rummaging there. “There are *never* any safety pins.”

Ferd made sympathetic noises, went to see if he had any; but, though he was sure there’d been some in the office, he couldn’t find them. So they drove off with one side of the diaper tied in a clumsy knot.

At lunch, Ferd said it was too bad about the safety pins. Oscar dug his teeth into a sandwich, tugged, tore, chewed, swallowed. Ferd liked to experiment with sandwich spreads—the one he liked most was cream cheese, olives, anchovy, and avocado, mashed up with a little mayonnaise—but Oscar always had the same pink luncheon meat.

“It must be difficult with a baby.” Ferd nibbled. “Not just traveling, but raising it.”

Oscar said, “Jeez, there’s drugstores in every block, and if you can’t read, you can at least reckernize them.”

“Drugstores? Oh, to buy safety pins, you mean.”

"Yeah. Safety pins."

"But . . . you know . . . it's true . . . there's never any safety pins when you look."

Oscar uncapped his beer, rinsed the first mouthful around. "Aha! Always plenny of clothes hangers, though. Throw 'em out every month, next month same closet's full of 'em again. Now whatcha wanna do in your spare time, you invent a device which it'll make safety pins outa clothes hangers."

Ferd nodded abstractedly. "But in my spare time I'm working on the French racer. . . ." It was a beautiful machine, light, low-slung, swift, red, and shining. You felt like a bird when you rode it. But, good as it was, Ferd knew he could make it better. He showed it to everybody who came into the place until his interest slackened.

Nature was his latest hobby, or, rather, reading about nature. Some kids had wandered by from the park one day with tin cans in which they had put salamanders and toads, and they proudly showed them to Ferd. After that, the work on the red racer slowed down and he spent his spare time on natural history books.

"Mimicry!" he cried to Oscar. "A wonderful thing!"

Oscar looked up interestedly from the bowling scores in the paper. "I seen Edie Adams on TV the other night, doing her imitation of Marilyn Monroe. Boy oh boy."

Ferd was irritated, shook his head. "Not that kind of mimicry. I mean how insects and arachnids will mimic the shapes of leaves and twigs and so on, to escape being eaten by birds or other insects and arachnids."

A scowl of disbelief passed over Oscar's heavy face. "You mean they change their *shapes*? What you giving me?"

"Oh, it's true. Sometimes the mimicry is for aggressive purposes, though—like a South African turtle that looks like a rock and so the fish swim up to it and then it catches them. Or that spider in Sumatra. When it lies on its back, it looks like a bird dropping. Catches butterflies that way."

Oscar laughed, a disgusted and incredulous noise. It died away as he turned back to the bowling scores. One hand groped at his pocket, came away, scratched absently at the orange thicket under the shirt, then went patting his hip pocket.

"Where's that pencil?" he muttered, got up, stomped into the office, pulled open drawers. His loud cry of "Hey!" brought Ferd into the tiny room.

"What's the matter?" Ferd asked.

Oscar pointed to a drawer. "Remember that time you claimed there were no safety pins here? Look—whole gahdamn drawer is full of 'em."

Ferd stared, scratched his head, said feebly that he was certain he'd looked there before. . . .

A contralto voice from outside asked, "Anybody here?"

Oscar at once forgot the desk and its contents, called, "Be right with you," and was gone. Ferd followed him slowly.

There was a young woman in the shop, a rather massively built young woman with muscular calves and a deep chest. She was pointing out the seat of her bicycle to Oscar, who was saying "Uh-huh" and looking more at her than at anything else. "It's just a little too far forward ('Uh-huh'), as you can see. A wrench is all I need ('Uh-huh'). It was silly of me to forget my tools."

Oscar repeated, "Uh-huh" automatically, then snapped to. "Fix it in a jiffy," he said, and—despite her insistence that she could do it herself—he did fix it. Though not quite in a jiffy. He refused money. He prolonged the conversation as long as he could.

"Well, thank you," the young woman said. "And now I've got to go."

"That machine feel all right to you now?"

"Perfectly. Thanks. . . ."

"Tell you what, I'll just ride along with you a little bit, just . . ."

Pear-shaped notes of laughter lifted the young woman's bosom. "Oh, you couldn't keep up with me! My machine is a racer!"

The moment he saw Oscar's eye flit to the corner, Ferd knew what he had in mind. He stepped forward. His cry of "No" was drowned out by his partner's loud, "Well, I guess this racer here can keep up with yours!"

The young woman giggled richly, said, well, they would see about that, and was off. Oscar, ignoring Ferd's outstretched hand, jumped on the French bike and was gone. Ferd stood in the doorway, watching the two figures, hunched over their handlebars, vanish down the road into the park. He went slowly back inside.

It was almost evening before Oscar returned, sweaty but smiling. Smiling broadly. "Hey, what a babe!" he cried. He wagged his head, he whistled, he made gestures, noises like escaping steam. "Boy oh boy, what an afternoon!"

"Give me the bike," Ferd demanded.

Oscar said, Yeah, sure; turned it over to him and went to wash. Ferd looked at the machine. The red enamel was covered with dust; there was mud spattered and dirt and bits of dried grass. It seemed soiled—degraded. He had felt like a swift bird when he rode it. . . .

Oscar came out wet and beaming. He gave a cry of dismay, ran over.

“Stand away,” said Ferd, gesturing with the knife. He slashed the tires, the seat and seat cover, again and again.

“You crazy?” Oscar yelled. “You outa your mind? Ferd, no, don’t, Ferd. . . .”

Ferd cut the spokes, bent them, twisted them. He took the heaviest hammer and pounded the frame into shapelessness, and then he kept on pounding till his breath was gasping.

“You’re not only crazy,” Oscar said bitterly, “you’re rotten jealous. You can go to hell.” He stomped away.

Ferd, feeling sick and stiff, locked up, went slowly home. He had no taste for reading, turned out the light and fell into bed, where he lay awake for hours, listening to the rustling noises of the night and thinking hot, twisted thoughts.

They didn’t speak to each other for days after that, except for the necessities of the work. The wreckage of the French racer lay behind the shop. For about two weeks, neither wanted to go out back where he’d have to see it.

One morning Ferd arrived to be greeted by his partner, who began to shake his head in astonishment even before he started speaking. “How did you *do* it, how did you *do* it, Ferd? Jeez, what a beautiful job—I gotta hand it to you—no more hard feelings, huh, Ferd?”

Ferd took his hand. “Sure, sure. But what are you talking about?”

Oscar led him out back. There was the red racer, all in one piece, not a mark or scratch on it, its enamel bright as ever. Ferd gaped. He squatted down and examined it. It *was* his machine. Every change, every improvement he had made was there.

He straightened up slowly. “Regeneration . . .”

“Huh? What say?” Oscar asked. Then, “Hey, kiddo, you’re all white. Whad you do, stay up all night and didn’t get no sleep? Come on in and siddown. But I still don’t see how you done it.”

Inside, Ferd sat down. He wet his lips. He said, “Oscar—listen . . .”

"Yeah?"

"Oscar. You know what regeneration is? No? Listen. Some kinds of lizards, you grab them by the tail, the tail breaks off and they grow a new one. If a lobster loses a claw, it regenerates another one. Some kinds of worms—and hydras and starfish—you cut them into pieces, each piece will grow back the missing parts. Salamanders can regenerate lost hands, and frogs can grow legs back."

"No kidding, Ferd. But, uh, I mean: nature. Very interesting. But to get back to the bike now—how'd you manage to fix it so good?"

"I never touched it. It regenerated. Like a newt. Or a lobster."

Oscar considered this. He lowered his head, looked up at Ferd from under his eyebrows. "Well, now, Ferd . . . Look . . . How come all broke bikes don't do that?"

"This isn't an ordinary bike. I mean it isn't a real bike." Catching Oscar's look, he shouted, "Well, it's *true*!"

The shout changed Oscar's attitude from bafflement to incredulity. He got up. "So for the sake of argument, let's say all that stuff about bugs and the eels or whatever the hell you were talking about is true. But they're alive. A bike ain't." He looked down triumphantly.

Ferd shook his leg from side to side, looked at it. "A crystal isn't, either, but a broken crystal can regenerate itself if the conditions are right. Oscar, go see if the safety pins are still in the desk. Please, Oscar?"

He listened as Oscar, muttering, pulled the desk drawers out, rummaged in them, slammed them shut, tramped back.

"Naa," he said. "All gone. Like that lady said that time, and you said, there never are any safety pins when you want 'em. They disap—Ferd? What're . . . ?"

Ferd jerked open the closet door, jumped back as a shoal of clothes hangers clattered out.

"And like *you* say," Ferd said with a twist of his mouth, "on the other hand, there are always plenty of clothes hangers. There weren't any here before."

Oscar shrugged. "I don't see what you're getting at. But anybody could of got in here and took the pins and left the hangers. *I* could of—but I didn't. Or *you* could of. Maybe . . ." He narrowed his eyes. "Maybe you walked in your sleep and done it. You better see a doctor. Jeez, you look rotten."

Ferd went back and sat down, put his head in his hands. "I feel rotten. I'm scared, Oscar. Scared of what?" He breathed noisily.

"I'll tell you. Like I explained before, about how things that live in the wild places, they mimic other things there. Twigs, leaves . . . toads that look like rocks. Well, suppose there are . . . things . . . that live in people places. Cities. Houses. These things could imitate—well, other kinds of things you find in people places. . . ."

"*People* places, for crise sake!"

"Maybe they're a different kind of life form. Maybe they get their nourishment out of the elements in the air. You know what safety pins *are*—these other kinds of them? Oscar, the safety pins are the pupa forms and then they, like, *hatch*. Into the larval forms. Which look just like coat hangers. They feel like them, even, but they're not. Oscar, they're not, not really, not really, not . . ."

He began to cry into his hands. Oscar looked at him. He shook his head.

After a minute, Ferd controlled himself somewhat. He snuffled. "All these bicycles the cops find, and they hold them waiting for owners to show up, and then we buy them at the sale because no owners show up because there aren't any, and the same with the ones the kids are always trying to sell us, and they say they just found them, and they really did because they were never made in a factory. They grew. They grow. You smash them and throw them away. They regenerate."

Oscar turned to someone who wasn't there and wagged his head. "Hoo, boy," he said. Then, to Ferd: "You mean one day there's a safety pin and the next day instead there's a coat hanger?"

Ferd said, "One day there's a cocoon; the next day there's a moth. One day there's an egg; the next day there's a chicken. But with . . . these it doesn't happen in the open daytime where you can see it. But at night, Oscar—at night you can *hear* it happening. All the little noises in the nighttime, Oscar . . ."

Oscar said, "Then how come we ain't up to our belly button in bikes? If I had a bike for every coat hanger . . ."

But Ferd had considered that, too. If every codfish egg, he explained, or every oyster spawn grew to maturity, a man could walk across the ocean on the backs of all the codfish or oysters there'd be. So many died, so many were eaten by predatory creatures, that nature had to produce a maximum in order to allow a minimum to arrive at maturity. And Oscar's question was: then who, uh, eats the, uh, coat hangers?

Ferd's eyes focused through wall, buildings, parks, more buildings, to the horizon. "You got to get the picture. I'm not talking

about real pins or hangers. I got a name for the others—'false friends,' I call them. In high school French, we had to watch out for French words that looked like English words, but really were different. *Faux amis*, they call them. False friends. Pseudo-pins. Pseudo-hangers . . . Who eats them? I don't know for sure. Pseudo-vacuum cleaners, maybe?"

His partner, with a loud groan, slapped his hands against his thighs. He said, "Ferd, Ferd, for crise sake. You know what's the trouble with you? You talk about oysters, but you forgot what they're good for. You forgot there's two kinds of people in the world. Close up them books, them bug books and French books. Get out, mingle, meet people. Soak up some brew. You know what? The next time Norma—that's this broad's name with the racing bike—the next time she comes here, *you* take the red racer and *you* go out in the woods with her. I won't mind. And I don't think she will, either. Not *too* much."

But Ferd said no. "I never want to touch the red racer again. I'm afraid of it."

At this, Oscar pulled him to his feet, dragging him protestingly out to the back and forced him to get on the French machine. "Only way to conquer your fear of it!"

Ferd started off, white-faced, wobbling. And in a moment was on the ground, rolling and thrashing, screaming.

Oscar pulled him away from the machine.

"It threw me!" Ferd yelled. "It tried to kill me! Look—blood!"

His partner said it was a bump that threw him—it was his own fear. The blood? A broken spoke. Grazed his cheek. And he insisted Ferd get on the bicycle again to conquer his fear.

But Ferd had grown hysterical. He shouted that no man was safe—that mankind had to be warned. It took Oscar a long time to pacify him and to get him to go home and into bed.

He didn't tell all this to Mr. Whatney, of course. He merely said that his partner had gotten fed up with the bicycle business.

"It don't pay to worry and try to change the world," he pointed out. "I always say take things the way they are. If you can't lick 'em, join 'em."

Mr. Whatney said that was his philosophy, exactly. He asked how things were, since.

"Well . . . not *too* bad. I'm engaged, you know. Name's Norma. Crazy about bicycles. Everything considered, things aren't bad at all. More work, yes, but I can do things all my own way, so . . ."

Mr. Whatney nodded. He glanced around the shop. "I see they're still making drop-frame bikes," he said, "though with so many women wearing slacks, I wonder they bother."

Oscar said, "Well, I dunno. I kinda like it that way. Ever stop to think that bicycles are like people? I mean, of all the machines in the world, only bicycles come male and female."

Mr. Whatney gave a little giggle, and said that was *right*, he had never thought of it like that before. Then Oscar asked if Mr. Whatney had anything in particular in mind—not that he wasn't always welcome.

"Well, I wanted to look over what you've got. My boy's birthday is coming up . . ."

Oscar nodded sagely. "Now here's a job," he said, "which you can't get it in any other place but here. Specialty of the house. Combines the best features of the French racer and the American standard, but it's made right here, and it comes in three models—junior, intermediate, and regular. Beautiful, ain't it?"

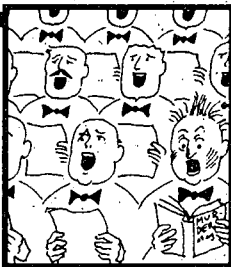
Mr. Whatney observed that, say, that might be just the ticket. "By the way," he asked, "what's become of the French racer, the red one, used to be here?"

Oscar's face twitched. Then it grew bland and innocent and he leaned over and nudged his customer. "Oh, *that* one. Old Frenchy? Why, I put *him* out to stud!"

And they laughed and they laughed, and after they told a few more stories they concluded the sale, and they had a few beers and they laughed some more. And then they said what a shame it was about poor Ferd, poor old Ferd, who had been found in his own closet with an unraveled coat hanger coiled tightly around his neck.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Jamie Harrison's **The Edge of the Crazyies** (Hyperion, \$20.95) whisks readers off to the small town of Blue Deer, Montana, where Sheriff Jules Clement labors to keep the peace. It's certainly become more challenging with the recent influx of show biz types longing to escape the violence and glitz of Hollywood for the fresh-air pleasures of Big Sky country. When someone takes a potshot at George Blackstone, wealthy writer of action-picture screenplays and the town's most famous citizen, Jules assumes it was merely George's crazy wife Mona. Then Mona winds up dead. Harrison invents a wacky landscape of an out-of-the-way place inhabited with eccentrics; the murder mystery merely provides a counterpoint to the townsfolks' antics.

A Far and Deadly Cry by Teri Holbrook (Bantam, \$4) introduces another American writer who, like Elizabeth George, has chosen small-town England for her setting. An apparently well-liked young woman dies in a bicycling accident, but under suspicious circumstances. The woman was the babysitter for Gale Grayson, the American wife of a British terrorist who committed suicide three years earlier; thus New Scotland Yard's Chief Inspector Daniel Halford and his likeable young sergeant are sent to the Hampshire village to investigate. It's a volatile subject, and Holbrook explores her themes—the insularity of a village, the vulnerability to pain when one loves deeply, the guilt that lives on even after loss—in this long, large-cast novel of psychological suspense. If you like Barbara Vine and Minette Walters, you'll welcome the first in this proposed series.

Walker and Company has debuted a new author, Richard Barre, with a powerful and tragic tale. **The Innocents** (\$19.95) intro-

duces California P.I. Wil Hardesty, a man whose life and happy marriage have never fully recovered from the accidental death of his son. When a freak desert storm uncovers the bones of seven murdered children, Wil is hired by a man who fears that he might be the father of one of the victims. The press is calling the children "The Innocents," and before Wil's investigation is over (after much hard work and some solid action scenes), it is clear that no one may be truly innocent of responsibility for the death of a child.

Cynthia Harrod-Eagles' latest Inspector Bill Slider mystery, **Grave Music** (Scribner, \$20), is a fresh variation on a theme: murder set to a new tune, if you will. The setting is London, where Slider's true love, Joanna, is but one of eighty-six orchestra members who witness the fatal shooting of a famous but generally detested conductor. Readers can hum along with Slider as he tries to make amends with Joanna, keep up with his sartorially splendid sidekick, and navigate a whole chorus of suspects who had reason to hate the maestro. Fans of British mysteries should appreciate this one.

Anyone who enjoys bright, strong, and sassy female private eyes should be reading Karen Kijewski. Her latest, **Alley Kat Blues** (Doubleday, \$22.95), is as good a place as any to meet her detective, Kat Colorado. It is Kat who discovers the body of a young woman on the freeway, the apparent victim of a hit and run, which is also the reason why she cannot refuse her latest case. In defiance of her strict husband and their religious sect's rigid rules, the dead woman's mother has a job for Kat: find out if Courtney was actually the victim of murder. Meanwhile, Kat's cop friend and lover, Hank, is becoming obsessed with his latest Las Vegas case, that of a serial strangler. Worse, as he gradually shuts Kat out, he lets in a young woman who Kat suspects is not what she appears. Cleverly plotted and resonating with emotion, *Alley Kat Blues* should go far to expand Kijewski's audience.

An irresistible new voice is what drives Judy Mercer's novel **Fast Forward** (Pocket Books, \$22), grabbing the reader by the throat from its opening, and then holding him through the last page. Our narrator wakes slowly from a nightmare, only to find that she is now living it. She has no idea who she is, nor even a flicker of recognition of her face in the mirror. (On the contrary, she's both disgusted and amazed to discover that she's fat!) Her house—if indeed it is her house—has been ransacked, and a bloodstained item of clothing has been tossed beneath her bed. It takes little time for the reader to realize how canny the protagonist is as she

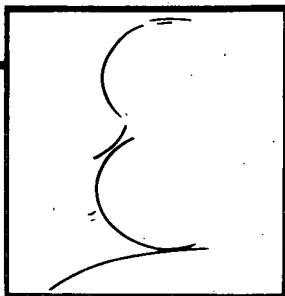
begins to piece together her identity and then cautiously assume her former life. The narrator only suspects what the reader knows: there is someone on the loose who has already killed once and is just waiting for the opportunity to kill again. What raises this tale heads above the average amnesiac, woman-in-jeopardy story is our heroine's pluck and indefatigable sense of humor. The result is a suspense novel with heaps of wit and not a little charm.

Spending time with Philip A. Craig on Martha's Vineyard is the next best thing to vacationing on the island. **A Case of Vineyard Poison** (Scribner, \$20) means quality time with the laid-back J. W. Jackson and his true love Zee, whom he plans to marry in a few short weeks. It means lazing under the sun, pottering in the vegetable garden, and rising early to catch the fish that J. W. will turn into succulent dishes or sell to supplement his police disability pension. It also means sharing their holiday with one old friend and one new one, a famous pianist who's escaped his schedule for a brief R & R. Finally, it involves J. W.'s sniffing around an odd incident at Zee's bank's ATM, and the sad case of a young college student who dies in his driveway after consuming a local poisonous plant. At book's end, however, what one remembers are the sunsets on J. W.'s deck, sipping white wine and munching on smoked bluefish on crackers. I can't think of another fictional private eye whose life makes me jealous, which puts J. W. Jackson in a class by himself.

Andrew Klavan's **True Crime** (Crown, \$21) is a breathtaking novel that documents the final day before the state of Missouri plans to execute a condemned murderer. The result is excruciatingly suspenseful. Frank Beachum was convicted of fatally shooting a young pregnant cashier at a convenience store. Six years later, there remains only the faintest hope of a reprieve from a governor who's gone on the record as being tough against crime. By a fluke, reporter Steve Everett is assigned to interview the prisoner for his paper and then attend the execution. Everett is clever but reckless, irresponsible, and undisciplined. It's unclear whom he callously hurts the most: those who trust him, or himself. But Everett is a great reporter, and like it or not, he can't ignore a small discrepancy in the state's case against Beachum. Carefully structured, intense and funny and harrowing, *True Crime* is a tour de force.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



It's been thirty years since new episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* aired on television every week. But since then, writers, directors, producers, and TV executives have tried to create other shows with that Hitchcock appeal. Not necessarily carbon copies of his celebrated series, but something that might have earned a nod of approval from Hitchcock.

While sitcoms and hospital dramas have ruled the airwaves of late, there's always room for the next *Perry Mason*, *Murder, She Wrote*, or *Twilight Zone*.

With this in mind, we offer a preview of the networks' upcoming fall season, with an eye toward mysteries, cop shows, courtroom dramas, and otherwise appropriate fare.

Murder One is perhaps the most intriguing new series. It

comes from Steven Bochco, whose other shows include the hits *Hill Street Blues*, *L.A. Law*, and *NYPD Blue*.

The hour-long ABC drama, set to air Thursdays at 10:00, will spend the entire season following one murder case. Surely Bochco is capitalizing on the public's insatiable appetite for anything like the O. J. Simpson murder trial.

The lurid murder chronicled in this series involves a wealthy businessman accused of brutally killing the teenage sister of his mistress.

ABC is also offering an hour of **Charlie Grace**, which stars Mark Harmon as a dry-witted, honest, and handsome ex-cop turned private eye. He doesn't get the high-profile, wealthy clients and is frequently bothered by ex-girlfriends. The other women in this private eye's life are his loving twelve-

year-old daughter and his ex-wife (her mom), who stands accused of murdering her rich second husband. It airs Thursdays at 8:00.

JAG, an unusually named series, brings us actor David James Elliott as Lieutenant Harmon Rabb, a navy lawyer for the judge advocate general's office (JAG, get it?). He is assisted by Andrea Parker as Lieutenant Kate Pike; the two investigate murder, espionage, and other military crimes from their base in Washington, D.C.

Didn't Tom Cruise, working with Demi Moore, play this role in the movie *A Few Good Men*? Well, it worked for him. **JAG** is written, directed, and produced by Donald Bellisario, who brought *Quantum Leap* and *Magnum, P.I.* to the tube. It's on NBC, Saturdays at 8:00.

CBS is betting that bestselling author John Grisham will translate well to the small screen. It's turning **The Client**, already a big screen hit, into a weekly, hour-long series. With a stellar cast consisting of JoBeth Williams, John Heard, Polly Holliday, and Ossie Davis, this show has a good chance at success. Williams plays Atlanta-based lawyer Reggie Love, who practices family law and is also involved in a bitter custody dispute over her own children. Heard is district attorney Foltrigg, her le-

gal sparring partner. It airs Thursdays at 9:00.

The Courthouse is another legal ensemble drama from CBS. This story of the judges, lawyers, and their staffs at a gritty, urban courthouse stars Patricia Wettig, Robin Givens, Brad Johnson, Annabeth Gish, and Michael Lerner. In the courthouse cast we'll find a tough, sexy judge (Wettig), a maverick, fresh-faced jurist just in from Montana (Johnson), a zealous public defender (Givens), and a shy young attorney assigned to the sex crimes unit (Gish). It's scheduled for Wednesdays at 10:00.

In addition to the regular weekly network series, there are quite a few TV movies and miniseries that deal with murder, kidnapping, scorned women, scorned men, and other unspeakable crimes and misdemeanors.

Three of the more familiar characters who will be resurrected by way of the TV movie are our old friends Chris Cagney and Mary Beth Lacey, who will reunite for CBS, and Jim Rockford, who'll be seen on the same network.

Let the viewing begin and may the best series stay on the air.

NOTE: All times above are Eastern Time and are subject to change. — ED.

THE STORY THAT WON



The June Mysterious won by James E. Hag-
ida. Honorable mentions
Chelsea, Michigan; Bill
Manitoba, Canada; Lesa
Kentucky; Leah Suslov-

York; Andrea Gradidge of Wawanesa, Manitoba, Canada; William D. Long of Roll-
ing Hills Estates, California; D. B. Hall of Minford, Ohio; T. L. Dale of Blackwell,
Oklahoma; Raymond McGlynn of Los Angeles, California; Art Cosing of Fairfax,
Virginia; and Charley Cook of Newburg, Missouri.

Photograph contest was
erty of Melbourne, Flor-
go to Rob Northrup of
Matthisen of Winnipeg,
Neace of Whitesburg,
ich of Brooklyn, New

THE UNKINDEST CUT by James E. Hagerty

At the edge of the copse where Helen Cicero's knifed body was found, Dr. Marcus, coroner, and Sheriff Lucas came upon an unusual sight in their search for clues.

"Look at that spigot handle!" Sheriff Lucas exclaimed.

"Interesting," Dr. Marcus said. "Any suspects?"

"Her husband."

"Professor Cicero? Motive?"

"Helen was seeing Brutus Jones," he responded, reaching for the handle.

"Don't touch it," Dr. Marcus cautioned.

"She was bedding some boys from the Temple Bar and Grill. The only one still in town is Brutus."

"A dish fit for the gods."

"What?" Sheriff Lucas asked.

"Never mind. Does Brutus have an alibi?"

"He's in the hospital recovering from prostration."

"And Professor Cicero?"

"At home reading *Julius Caesar*, waiting for Helen to return from her book review club."

"*Julius Caesar*? Does Cicero teach English lit?"

"Classical languages."

"He's your man, sheriff."

"How do you know?"

"This spigot handle is a faucet handle."

"Spigot . . . faucet . . . whatever."

"If memory serves, faucet comes from the Latin word *falsus* for

(continued on page 159)

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continued from page 157)

false, and *fallere*, which means to deceive. Helen was deceiving her husband. He killed her and left this clue which he assumed would remain unexplained."

"How do I prove all of that?"

"Quote *Julius Caesar* to him. Get him where he lives. Say, 'For Brutus is an honorable man; so are they all honorable men.'" If that doesn't break him, trace the origin of this faucet handle."

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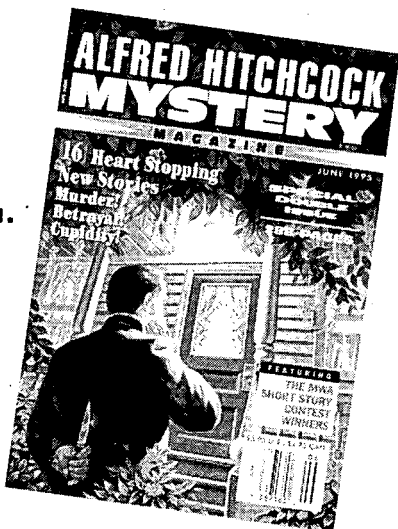
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